

# Participatory as can be...

## A case study of an evaluation

11

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### Introduction

This paper describes a project evaluation in which the external evaluator's main role was to help identify the project's information gaps and to propose an evaluation methodology that matched the data requirements. The design that resulted exploited the participatory approaches the project had used, and yet itself opted for questionnaires. What then was the participatory dimension of this review?<sup>1</sup>

### Design matters

The case at hand is that of a project that took its main target group through a participatory process, as was described in PLA Notes 37 (Kaim and Ndlovu, 2000). The project's evaluation used this as an opportunity for a shortcut to the data it needed. The author aims to demonstrate, firstly, how a project's information needs may dictate an evaluation's terms of reference and consequently, its ways of collecting the data. The paper's second argument is interwoven with the first one: participation ultimately is the result of people's readiness to engage on a certain topic, at a certain point in time, in a certain forum. It thus depends, among other things, on participants' interests, the time they have available, and what they stand to gain, or lose, from participating at that point in time. This, it is argued, is the opportunity as well as the limitation for a participatory design. Taking the two arguments together: in highly participatory projects conventional evaluation instruments may turn out to be the most appropriate.

### The Auntie Stella Project

The Adolescent Reproductive Health Education Project (ARHEP) has been working with secondary school students since the beginning of 1997. The project arose out of research undertaken by the Training and Research Support Centre (TARSC), on reproductive health rights in Zimbabwe. Early in 1998 ARHEP produced a reproductive health education pack named 'Auntie Stella'. This pack is modelled on the 'agony aunt' concept and is based on the stories, experiences and expressed needs of adolescents in the four secondary schools where ARHEP did its research. 'Auntie Stella' consists of 33 question and answer cards, the questions supposedly written by

adolescents seeking information and/or advice on a variety of topics. The answer cards give Auntie Stella's replies, the content part of which has been checked by a number of medical and other experts.

The topics covered include normal reproductive development, social and economic pressures to have sex, gender roles, forced sex, communication and relationships with parents, depression, wanted and unwanted pregnancy, infertility, cervical cancer and HIV/AIDS. The cards are discussed in small groups, with minimal intervention by the teacher. The methodology is based on research findings that adolescents are most at ease when talking to peers of the same sex, but feel inhibited in full-class discussions and in discussions with pupils of the opposite sex and especially in the presence of the teacher (Kaim and Ndlovu, 2000).

Since June 1998 the project worked in co-operation with Zimbabwe's Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture on a two year programme. The first year of this programme field-tested the Auntie Stella pack in eight pilot schools to assess the pack and the way it was used in the classroom, plus the kind of inputs needed for such a programme to be effective. The pilot thus included a cross-section of rural and peri-urban secondary schools, boarding and day scholars, farm and mine workers' children. All eight schools are co-educational institutions.

In each of the eight schools the pilot study addressed one form three class, with students aged 15 years and above. The lessons were part of the Guidance and Counselling classes which schools are required to provide on a weekly basis. The Project Officer monitored the teachers' use of the pack and ran several PRA type internal evaluations with all pilot classes. Students had been keen to participate, and had given very positive feedback on what they felt they had gained. At the time of the evaluation, one year after the introduction of Auntie Stella, and about two months after the internal evaluations, the pilot class students were preparing for their O level exams before leaving school.

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<sup>1</sup> The article makes no distinction between 'review' and 'evaluation'.

## The evaluation

### *Agreeing on terms of reference:*

The terms were drafted by the Project Manager and went through several discussion rounds with the evaluator. The evaluator would concentrate on the review's design; project staff would assist in data collection, and, if necessary, in data analysis.

### Demonstrating effect

The project had been using intensive, participatory techniques soliciting the students to define their own indicators of success in dealing with the reproductive health challenges of adolescence (Kaim and Ndlovu, 2000). The Auntie Stella pack clearly filled a felt need and yet it was not possible, based on available information, to be precise on the extent of the Auntie Stella pack's success, nor on its shortcomings. Getting accessible quantitative data on processes and results would be the evaluation's priority.

### A logical framework as an aide-memoire

The easiest way to capture the different levels at which the project could have effected change was to differentiate between input; process and activities; output; outcome, impact and replication as in a logical framework. A one-page adaptation of the logical framework matrix was drawn to give an overview of potential review issues, and of corresponding information requirements. Table 1 below lists a selection of the review items that were suggested.

The design thus used the logframe's ability to summarise many ideas and their interrelations and make them visually accessible (Des Gasper, 1997). The matrix served as a probe; it did not aim to impose a project logic.

### Questionnaires for speed and privacy

Project staff liked the idea of using a questionnaire based on the cells in the log frame's matrix, for both teachers and students. The questionnaires were edited by project staff and then tried out in one school. Teachers and students filled out their questionnaires in the presence of the evaluator or the Project Officer, during school hours. With the students, the questionnaire, which was anonymous, was first read together, and explained in vernacular, and opportunity given for clarifications. With the teachers there was extensive discussion afterwards. In each school this process took less than two hours. Four

**Table 1: Selected examples of indications and indicators suggested to guide Project review, presented in the style of a Logical Framework**

*NB: All of these need a comparison with the situation before introduction of the Auntie Stella pack, or with existing instruments of adolescent reproductive health education.*

Input	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Aunt Stella packs required per school per unit of time</li> <li>● cost per distributed pack</li> <li>● time it takes for teachers to learn how to use the pack.</li> </ul>
Process and Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● complementarity (define) with existing reproductive health education classes and methods</li> <li>● 'student participation' compared to former or other reproductive health education classes</li> <li>● evidence of discussion on the pack's lessons with pupils in non-pilot classes; siblings; friends; parents..</li> </ul>
Output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Proportion of male and female students in a) pilot classes; b) in school who completed the Auntie Stella course.</li> </ul>
Outcome	(students; content): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Proportion of male and female students in pilot classes who are able make an informed decision on situations such as sketched in the Auntie Stella pack.</li> </ul>
Impact and replication	(students): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Proportion of male and female students in pilot classes who usually make an informed decision on situations such as sketched in the Auntie Stella pack</li> </ul> (teachers, schools): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Proportion of teachers adapting Aunt Stella pack to incorporate reproductive health issues not covered by the pack.</li> </ul>

schools were taken in the study sample. Fieldwork, including transport, thus took a mere two days. The limited time demand was a pleasant surprise for both project staff, teachers and particularly for the students, who were busy preparing for their exams.

### Visual data

The questionnaires had been designed with a view to be assured of clear visual images of the evaluation results. Below is an example of one of the nine questions to the students, with the results (Figure 1).

The totality of the data was the basis for a comprehensive set of conclusions on the added value of the Auntie Stella pack. Readers interested in the project can look up the website ([www.tarsc.org](http://www.tarsc.org)), which also contains the evaluation report.

### Positive qualities of the evaluation

The review had a number of positive qualities, some of which are inherent to the project while others were a result of the evaluation design, or of trust between the people involved:

- *Interesting intervention in a difficult subject area:* Adolescents' reproductive health is a main concern in Zimbabwe. Few interventions can claim success in this difficult area. A well-researched education pack with an innovative approach is an appealing subject for an evaluation, especially if there is scope to help raise a pilot intervention to a wider application.

- *Evaluation as a process, in partnership:* The evaluation was a joint process that took a couple of months, and yet in terms of the number of consultancy days available, was limited. This was possible because, as a locally based consultant, the evaluator could spread the assignment over time and go with the flow of the project. The process thus matched the abilities, interests and availability of the persons involved.
- *Spotting the information gaps, in the project's interest:* The evaluator had actively sought weaknesses in the project's available data, not to find fault, but to make the evaluation as useful as possible. Talking over the terms of reference then was a way to decide what additional data would be focused on. This discussion, which took place before the contract was signed, set the stage for an evaluation methodology that both parties agreed on.
- *Ownership of data:* The laborious work of data compilation and preparing the data for presentation stopped short of analysing the implications of the data. Ownership of the data was firmly with the project and its decision-makers. The evaluator was a mere facilitator, and barely seen at that. By the time she was writing her report, the project had already drawn its conclusions on the way forward.
- *Room for diversity:* Where most reviews have difficulty avoiding the 'dichotomy trap'- bad versus good; old versus new; conventional versus participatory, and so on – the methodology brought out the weight of diverse opinions, thus reflecting the complexity of real life. Such data signal a message 'This is as close as we can get to "the truth", at this point in time. What do you, reader, make of it?' and so support a more informed debate.
- *Transparency:* The data collected were comprehensively presented in the report. Where the evaluator drew conclusions these were clearly guided by the data. Both the process and the results were transparent.

### Discussion: Defining participation in evaluation

Despite the above qualities one may query to what extent this was a participatory evaluation. 'Participatory' is of course a much-used term and in an evaluation generally refers to participation of stakeholders or end-users. A working definition is 'participation is a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over decisions and resources that affect their lives' (Fowler,

**Figure 1: Results of a question to the students, as presented to the project's Reference Group for discussion**

**Question: Do you actually take responsible decisions when you find yourself in situations such as described in the Auntie Stella cards?**  
(Note: This question followed on "Has the Aunt Stella experience made you more confident to take responsible decisions in situations such as described in the cards?")

No	Yes, in some situations	Yes, in most situations	Yes, definitely, even in situations not directly addressed by Aunt Stella	Not applicable since no such situation occurred	Other
GIRLS answer:					
n=1 2%	n=18 34%	n=22 42%	n=7 13%	n=5 9%	n=0 0%
BOYS answer:					
n=2 3%	n=28 37%	n=27 36%	n=10 13%	n=9 12%	n=0 0%

Form 4 students in 4 out of the 8 secondary schools in the pilot project.  
n and % give number and proportion of students.  
Total n of girl respondents: 53; Total n of boy respondents: 76. Only one answer allowed.

1997). This definition assumes that an intervention is of such interest and magnitude that it can affect peoples' lives. However, not every project has such qualities. In the Auntie Stella Project students were happy to give their views on the project's merits, but were otherwise busy with other things that really affected their lives such as exams. Projects do affect people's lives, but may over-estimate their importance when demanding participation in time-consuming reviews.

### The concept of defection

In the project at hand the target group of adolescents had together, in class, come to a deeper level of understanding on what reproductive health meant for them. Repeating this process would have been a duplication from the students' perspective. Lack of interest, and a tepid, or partial response would have been the result, which would have defeated the evaluation's purpose to get improved observations generated by the target group. This, of course is an assumption that cannot be corroborated for this case. 'Defection', however, was imminent in one of the four schools selected for the review: when the students were told that 'Auntie Stella' was coming back for yet another evaluation they were clearly reluctant to join. Only when they heard that this evaluation had a different purpose, and would be brief, and would be altogether different, since private and in writing, did they decide to stay.

'Defection' has many forms – allowing the mind to wander, or walking out, or merely not reaching for one's core layers and give shallow or fake answers. Every practitioner, and probably every

reader, will know what is meant here and will recognise both defection and participation at a glance, in any setting.

### From values to observations

It is the author's contention that when participants have reason to be truly 'switched on', and for as long as they can afford to be, and if a host of other conditions is fulfilled – such as, indeed, use of appropriate techniques – are participatory meetings set to reflect the best of what the collective of people present are prepared to express and share. The evidence suggested that it was this kind of whole-hearted participation that the Auntie Stella pack had induced in the reproductive health classes of the students who formed the target group in this review. What the evaluation had to do was turn the students' experience into observations that others could access.

### Affordability

From an evaluator's perspective the participatory history of the project had several sides to it: on the one hand the project had resulted in a target group that had been deeply affected by the project. The emotive nature of the intervention could be exploited. On the other hand the participatory history meant that the target group had already benefited from a collective process, and had come to closure. The opportunity to generate improved observations in the same collective on the same topic was thus no longer there. The evaluation needed to come up with an instrument for data collection that the students were willing to afford.

### Shortcuts

Combining the above pointed to shortcuts. For example, the question 'Do you actually take responsible decisions when you find yourself in situations such as described in the Auntie Stella cards?' is open to all kinds of bias. In this case respondents had as a group grappled with the meaning of 'responsible behaviour', stimulated by the Auntie Stella cards. The evaluation could thus avoid external definitions of terms such as 'responsible behaviour'. Reference to the joint experience made it possible for individuals to indicate changes in their behaviour as a result of working with the Auntie Stella cards, while using their own points of reference.

*Participation:* At an individual level the students 'participated' fully, as was clear from the hushed intensity with which they completed the questionnaire, and by the fact that over 90% used the blank spaces provided and often even the back of their questionnaire, to illustrate their answers. On several occasions those who had missed the session came to ask for the forms, which they then filled out right away, on the spot.

## With the benefit of hindsight ...

The ARHEP Programme Manager, who is still involved in the project, gave her reflections on what the evaluation meant for the project, well over a year after the evaluation:

'Comments on the Auntie Stella pack reinforced our findings and gave us the confidence to make the pack more accessible to a wider audience. The evaluation's more quantitative approach to assessing Auntie Stella in the schools was a good balance to our more qualitative approach. Since the evaluation, ARHEP has strengthened relations with youth-servicing organisations (working with both in-school and out-of-school youths) and moved more consciously into institutional capacity building and advocacy both with government and civic groups. Closer networking has resulted in ARHEP playing a much more central role in the development of Adolescent Reproductive Health programmes and policy in Zimbabwe.'

The review findings thus held no surprise, which on hindsight is what one could expect, given that project staff knew the strengths and weaknesses of the pack. The review organised those observations and make them visible for other actors such as new institutional partners.

## Conclusion

The Auntie Stella Project admittedly is a small project that consists of a single intervention, based on a single concept: the agony aunt, advising teenagers on sensitive and heart felt matters. Yet this case illustrates how evaluations each have their own design challenge. In conclusion:

- Discussions about terms of reference focus evaluations, and avoids unrealistic expectations. It bodes well for joint ownership of evaluation findings.
- Such discussion may point to evaluation design opportunities. In particular:
- When the project's target group has already completed a participatory process, and thereby as a group has acquired 'improved points of view', an evaluation can exploit this and so minimise the 'cost' (to participants) of participating.
- At the same time a participatory project history limits the opportunity for an evaluation to generate collectively improved observations: participants have already benefited from the collective experience and are likely to defect when there appears to be little to gain from another such process on the same topic.
- Evaluation instruments should thus be decided by what the situation requires. There is no hard and fast rule on what constitutes a participatory methodology, other than that it must inspire people to take part, and take part whole-heartedly.

- In the case described questionnaires appeared the most appropriate to turn points of view of a literate target group into observations that others could access. Or, in other words: when a preceding collective process has resulted in improved points of view of the individuals concerned, this improvement can be expected to reflect in the responses on any data collection instrument that taps these points of view.

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