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Exchanging on social power in health

Evaluating efforts that build social power and participation in health systems

Introduction to the briefs

Social participation in health refers to people's individual and collective power and involvement in the conditions, decisions and actions that affect their health and health services. It can take many forms and levels and may be initiated from within the community or by outside institutions. It takes place within formal and informal, invited or claimed spaces and within different functions of health systems. It may be ad hoc and transient or sustained. In *Shaping health* we focused on those forms of participation where communities co-decide the actions and services for their health and wellbeing, through their awareness, their collective power and power to act.

Diverse reasons motivate evaluation and review of these processes, whether to support internal strategic review and learning from action, to generate and share knowledge and insights, or to build external policy, funder and management support. Evaluation processes thus focus on a mix of social, system, service and health outcomes, while noting their context dependent nature, the time they take to emerge and the different ways they need to be gathered and measured.

At the same time, those involved have raised cautions on what is evaluated in relation to social participation and its role in improved health, and when and how such evaluation is implemented. Direct attribution of health impacts to participation is complicated by the context and time- dependent nature of these processes, by the many factors that lie between participation processes and potential outcomes, and by the lack of the sort of disaggregated routine needed to assess the processes and outcomes. More importantly evaluations may not adequately recognise the inherent value of participation as a goal in its own right.

The literature on social power and participation in health thus often focuses on what was done, with limited systematic consideration of its health impacts. Few sites in *Shaping health* had conducted formal outcome evaluations on their participatory processes, although many had implemented process evaluations and strategic reviews. In the 2017 *Shaping health* review meeting, concerns were raised on what is being assessed and how; who makes the decisions on this; on the value given to different kinds of evidence and knowledge; and the need for approaches that are accessible, relevant and credible for all those involved.

These four briefs provide information on evaluation of social participation and power in health to support capacity and practice. They are intended primarily for those working directly with social participation and power in health systems, but also for managers, funders and others who engage with them. They intend to inform thinking and approaches and provide links to deeper resources and do not intend to prescribe or be a 'how to' toolkit. The four briefs address:

- BRIEF 1: The concepts and approaches applied in 'monitoring and evaluation processes.'
- BRIEF 2: Approaches to assessing change in social participation and power in health
- BRIEF 3: The methods used for participatory evaluation
- BRIEF 4: Engaging funders and formal systems on evaluations of social power in health



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