Reviewer’s report

Title: Community based needs assessment in an urban area; A participatory action research

Version: 3 Date: 19 November 2011

Reviewer: Kathryn Braun

Reviewer’s report:

Thank you for the opportunity to review this paper, reporting on a Community Health Assessment undertaken in Northwest Iran. The project was conducted using a participatory approach, which engaged a large number of community members in data collection, analysis, and prioritization of issues. Community members were considered equal partners in the process and gained skills, as well as knowledge, through their participation.

It is very important to publish reports of participatory research projects, and this study provides an outstanding example of how researchers can engage with communities in the assessment phase of research. The manuscript, however, needs some revision and editing before publication. Here are my suggestions:

1. Abstract. Overall, the abstract is well written. However, it can be improved if you:
   a. Add under method that the steering committee included representatives from 12 blocks or districts of the community.
   b. Add that these representatives were trained and then conducted focus groups in their block, and that focus group findings informed the development of the questionnaire.
   c. Revise the last sentence of methods as: “each health problem identified by the community was weighted based on the frequency it was selected on the survey, and steering committee perception of the problem’s seriousness, urgency, solvability, and financial load.”
   d. Revise the sentence under results about empowerment. I don’t think you can say that your findings increased participation, because you did not measure participation pre and post. You can say something like: “High participation rates of community members in the steering committee and survey suggest that the PAR approach was greatly appreciated by the community and that problems identified through this research truly reflect community opinion.”

2. Background. The background section presents some interesting information from the literature. However, it can be streamlined considerably. Here’s how I would revise it into 5 paragraphs.
   a. Paragraph 1 – “Assessing community health is a core function of public health. The Future of Public Health recommended that local public health agencies “regularly ….”[3]. “
b. Paragraph 2 – “Definitions of community health assessment (CHA) vary widely. (rest of existing paragraph) CHA should not be confused with a clinical needs assessment, which gathers data from an individual so that a treatment plan can be developed. CHA looks more broadly at community issues and population well-being, recognizing that health is not merely the absence of disease.”

c. Paragraph 3 – “Training communities to help collect and interpret needs assessment data has many advantages, including increasing feelings of community empowerment [8]. A commitment to community participation and empowerment is at the heart of the WHO….[10] (rest of existing paragraph).”

d. Paragraph 4 – “Participatory action research (PAR) is an approach that operationalizes the recommendations of WHO for participation. PAR works with a community….. Empowerment, power sharing, and social change are important goals. (rest of existing paragraph).”

e. Paragraph 5 – “The purpose of this paper is to report on a PAR approach to CHA conducted in Ardabil, a city in the northwest of Iran. In this project, researchers from Ardabil Medical University worked with and trained community members to collect and interpret CHA data. This project followed a series of prior activities among the partners. For example, university members had provided community classes, helped facilitate repairs to sewers and pathway lighting consultation, organized sports teams. These activities had developed trust between the university and community, and paved the way for the current project.”

3. Methods – This section also can be streamlined and reorganized for clarity.

a. Study Design. Start with something like: “A community PAR was conducted drawing on theories of community mobilization, participation, and empowerment. The steps included…. (something like 1) establish the steering committee 2) decide on methods 3) transfer knowledge 4) collect data and 5) interpret data and prioritize needs.”

b. Steering Committee. Insert your paragraph on “involving CDC and selecting executives,” and then give an overview of mixed methods data collection methods—first focus groups and then questionnaire (move this from page 9).

c. Knowledge Transfer. Insert your paragraph on “knowledge transfer.”

d. Methods of Data Collection. This section is good, but please clarify 1) if and how focus group findings informed the development of the questionnaire and 2) the types of questions on the questionnaire (for example, you say there were 60 items….but were 10 demographic items? Were some attitude items? Or did you just give respondents with a list of 60 problems to rank? How was each problem scored…was it “yes or no” or did you have a scale?

e. Methods of Data Analysis. Information on the weighting of the results appears here and then again on pages 11 and 12. Please consolidate all the information into this section. Also, define what you mean by financial load, for example do you mean “cost to fix to problem” or do you mean “cost benefit to the people if the problem were fixed” or what? It would be helpful to provide an example of
how the scoring worked. For asphalt, for example, did 300 people check it, and then you multiplied by 8.6, 7.5, 5.5, and 4.8 to get 2508.3? When did you apply the 1-100 number mentioned on page 11?

4. Results – This section is OK, but move the information about weighing from this section to the methods section, as mentioned above. Also, the next-to-last paragraph belongs in the discussion section.

Level of interest: An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests