

**Facilitating Communities in Designing and Using
Their Own Community Health Impact Assessment Tool**

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The Commission on the Social Determinants of Health strongly affirms that the root causes of disease and health inequalities, and the most significant factor in determining the health of people and populations, are the social and physical living conditions of people (WHO, 2005). Included in the recommendations to achieve health equity, the Commission recommended actions to improve the conditions of daily living, tackling the inequitable distribution of power, money and resources, measuring and assessing the impact of policies and programs, and raising awareness of the social determinants of health among practitioners and the public (WHO 2008).

People Assessing Their Health (PATH) is a health promotion/community development process that uses community health impact assessment to build the capacity of people to become active participants in the decisions that affect the well-being of their community. PATH does this by facilitating the community in developing their own community health impact assessment tool (CHIAT) and enabling the community to use this tool in assessing the potential positive and negative impacts of any policy, program, project or service on the health of the community. The process uses a reflective story-telling approach and is grounded in the principles of adult education and the belief that people know a lot about what makes them and their communities healthy.

The PATH process was originally used in three communities in northeastern Nova Scotia, Canada in 1996, at a time when the Canadian health care system was being restructured to a

more decentralized system where there was to be more involvement at the community level (Gillis & English, 2001). Since then it has been used in other communities in Nova Scotia and in 2006 it was introduced in Mukitmanipur, India with a tribal community that was about to embark on an Endogenous Tourism Project. More recently, the community health impact assessment tool developed by the community health board in Antigonish, Nova Scotia has been used by a group of citizens to assess the potential impact of a large recreation/tourism project on the well-being of that community.

Health impact assessment (HIA), as defined by the International Association for Impact Assessment, is a “combination of procedures, methods and tools that systematically judges the potential and sometimes unintended effects of a policy, plan, programme or project on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population. HIA identifies appropriate actions to manage those effects” (IAIA, 2006, pg 1). Health impact assessment is increasingly becoming an accepted method by governments and NGOs, of assessing potential impacts of policies or programs on the health of populations. While HIA can be highly technical it can also be a simple, practical process which enables local people to become informed and active decision makers in bringing about the changes required for better health (Mittelmark, 2001).

Improving the health of communities requires a community development approach that builds people’s ability to critically analyze a situation and to engage in effective social action to bring about desired change. UNESCO, (1997) believes that health promotion and health education must focus on learning and empowerment. PATH is an empowering process for community members because it increases analytical skills and provides communities with their own unique

tool to assess the potential impact of projects, programs or policies on the health of their community.

This paper will describe the PATH process and the community health impact assessment process as well as the methodology used in the process. The lessons learned from PATH's experiences of health promotion and capacity building within the community will be discussed. Since the PATH process is based on peoples own experience and results in a unique community-driven health impact assessment process, lessons learned about the facilitation of the process in Nova Scotia and West Bengal, India will be included in the discussion.

Community Health Impact Assessment

Community health impact assessment is a way to bring the health concerns of the community forward in discussions of public policy. Since our health and well-being are influenced by a wide range of factors both within and outside the health sector (the determinants of health), community health impact assessment is useful in examining any policy, program, project or service that will affect the population as a whole as well as specific groups within the community.

Community health impact assessment is based on the idea that the development of *healthy public policy* (public policy that is characterized by an explicit concern for health and equity, and which aims to create a supportive environment to enable people to lead healthy lives) requires broad citizen involvement.

Community health impact assessment allows communities to:

- Estimate the effect that a particular activity (a policy, program, project or service) will have on the health and well-being of the community.
- Identify things to do that will maximize the benefits (the positive effects) and minimize the harm (the negative effects) of that activity.

Most policies or programs have both positive and negative effects on a given population (a geographic community or a specific “community” of people within that geographic area). For this reason, community health impact assessment does not determine if a policy is “right” or “wrong”. Rather, it helps to identify how a particular activity will enhance or diminish the many factors that the community considers important for its overall well-being.

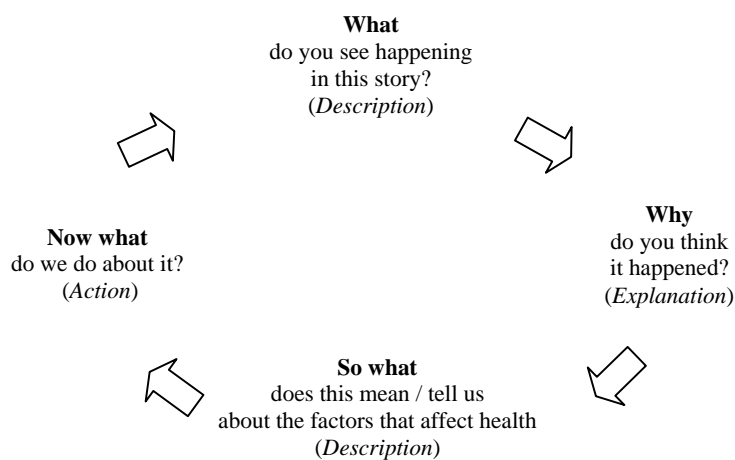
The PATH Process

PATH uses a facilitated process to engage a community in developing its own unique community health impact assessment tool (CHIAT). The CHIAT can then be used to examine policies, programs or services proposed by governments (local, provincial or federal), institutions and community groups, as well as major infrastructure projects.

The PATH process increases people’s awareness of the determinants of health and the role played by community members in creating healthy public policy. The process uses the following steps:

- ◆ Step 1: Answer the question: “What does it take to make and keep our community healthy?”

With the help of a facilitator, people are invited to tell a story about their life experience, reflecting on the many factors that have influenced their health, including (but not limited to) health services. Using a technique adapted from *structured dialogue story-telling* (Labonte and Feather, 1996), the facilitator guides the group through a series of key questions to delve deeper into the story and identify the factors that affect health and well-being and the ways in which these things are inter-related.



- ◆ Step 2: Develop a *Vision of a Healthy Community*

With an increased understanding of the determinants of health, the group develops a vision of what their healthy community would look like. The Vision uses their own words and emphasizes their own priorities.

- ◆ Step 3: Design the community health impact assessment tool (CHIAT)

The group identifies all of the things that will be considered when doing a community health impact assessment by answering questions such as “What would be happening in the community if the different parts of the Vision were being achieved?” This activity provides a list of indicators that can be sorted, prioritized, and incorporated into the CHIAT.

- ◆ Step 4: Test the tool

The CHIAT is tested by actually doing an impact assessment on a real or imaginary initiative. The CHIAT is then revised to ensure that it is a useful and workable tool.

- ◆ Step 5: Make a plan to use the CHIAT

The CHIAT is now a unique community tool that can be used to assess projects, programs and policies that will have an impact on the community's health.

Lessons Learned

PATH involves two separate but related activities. The first activity (the PATH process) is a community development process that uses adult education techniques to raise awareness of the social determinants of health and to create a community health impact assessment tool (CHIAT). The second activity is facilitating the use of community health impact assessment (CHIA) to look at the potential positive and negative effects of a proposed project, program or policy. Experience shows that the *process* of creating the tool is one of community empowerment and is every bit as valuable as using the CHIAT itself (PATH Network, 2002).

The PATH process is based on David Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984) and the value of experiential learning. The use of the structured dialogue story-telling process is a method of discussion and analysis that is rooted in people's lived experiences. Using the PATH process results in community members increasing their understanding of the social determinants of health and how these determinants affect individuals, communities and populations. In addition

to the determinants of health, people are able to identify other priorities for their community (Peters, 2002). Basing the process on people's own experience results in different issues and priorities being identified in different communities. For example, the escalation of unemployment due to the collapse of the fisheries was a major determinant of health in one Nova Scotia community, while in a community in West Bengal, India, gender discrimination had a major impact on the health of that community (Cameron & Ghosh, 2006, Gillis & English, 2001). The process builds the capacity of the individuals and groups to do health planning and engage in decision making at the community level (Peters, 2002).

The development of the CHIAT must be based on a broad vision of health and needs to involve people from many sectors within the community. This fosters networking within and between communities. With the Antigonish Town and County Community Health Board CHIAT, the vision of a healthy community was based on the input from 57 focus groups, providing a wide representation from the area (PATH Network, 2002). In Mukutmanipur, West Bengal, the tool was developed by the Tourism Management Committee along with the local women's self-help group which ensured that voices from a variety of sectors were heard (Gosh & Cameron, 2006). The tool is as representative of the community as those sectors that inform its development.

Both the PATH process of awareness-raising and the actual use of the resulting assessment tool are important health promotion processes, however there is a need to balance these two activities. While it is possible to take an existing tool and adapt it to the local context, the process of sharing stories, developing a vision of a healthy community and understanding how the determinants act together to influence health may be missed. As a result, an adapted tool may not have the same relevance to the community (Peters, 2002). In the fall of 2008, a community

health impact assessment was conducted using the Antigonish Town and County Community Health Board Tool that had been developed in 2002. Since the group doing the assessment had not been involved in developing the tool, it was important to facilitate a process to raise awareness of the broad concept of health before the assessment took place.

The development and use of the tool needs to respect community time lines. As well, the process requires funding, good facilitation and administrative support in order for people to be able to participate and to develop their own leadership and facilitation skills. Having the clear goal of developing their own assessment tool motivates people to stay involved in the process (Peters, 2002).

Actually conducting a community health impact assessment (CHIA) results in local knowledge being validated, something that is very empowering for community members. However, in order for the assessment results to be effective, the broader system of decision-making must also value local knowledge. Communities may also need access to epidemiological or quantitative data in an understandable format so that they are able to make informed decisions. When a community group in Antigonish, Nova Scotia assessed the potential impact of a large recreational development project, they concluded that an environmental impact assessment and business feasibility study were essential pieces of information for decision-making.

Not all of the community groups that have developed CHIATs have used the actual tools; however they have used some of the techniques and knowledge from the PATH process in other community endeavors (Peters, 2002). For example a community health centre with programs that address the social determinants of health was set up in St. Anne's Bay, Nova Scotia. A local

women's self-help group in a rural village in West Bengal, India, identified micro enterprise endeavors and then lobbied to get the training they needed to set up their own micro enterprises. In another village in West Bengal, the Tourism Management Committee used their vision of a healthy community to develop their own People's Sustainable Tourism Charter. This charter reflects the values of the community that will guide them as they embark on their new Endogenous Tourism Project (Gosh & Cameron, 2006).

These examples demonstrate the important value of the PATH process in raising the awareness of the broad factors that affect the health of people and the communities that they live in and in enabling them to identify priorities areas for action. At the same time, communities that have used their assessment tool have found that they have a systematic approach that raises important questions and allows them to make informed decisions.

Doing a community health impact assessment of a contentious recreational development project in a rural Nova Scotia community allowed for different perspectives to be brought forward in a respectful manner, providing valuable information for local authorities to make informed, inclusive decisions. In another instance, the same tool was used to assess the potential impact of funding cuts to the local women's resource centre. The assessment provided important evidence that was presented to the local member of the provincial government showing the value of the centre.

The PATH process is a health promotion process that empowers people with the knowledge of the factors that determine the health of the community. Developing and using their own

community health impact assessment tool provides the community with the analytical skills and the tool required to ensure the health of the community for future generations.

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