

# SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR PARTICIPATORY ACTION EVALUATION<sup>i</sup>

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## 1 PAE employs special research methods —

- a participatory action evaluation is local and practical; if it makes a contribution beyond the project, it tends to do so to a field of practice, rather than to an academic discipline;
- b most research follows a fixed object of study, but participatory action evaluation helps to create and then follows moving research target; projects and participants change, and to respond to what's happening evaluations have to change research questions and processes with the program and people;
- c participatory evaluation aims to 'tell the story' of a project or program — it is expository rather than conclusive, persuasive rather than convincing, indicative rather than proven, suggestive rather than judgemental, and verdicts always remain partial and open;
- d knowledge is always generated in collaboration with participants in participatory evaluations, and it is primarily for the participants' own use.

## 2 PAE is not an audit.

All evaluations can provide information on which performance assessments could be based, but participatory action evaluation is not an auditing process as such. An audit is an external check on an organisation's performance data (such as the adequacy, reliability and validity of achievement indicators). In contrast, a participatory action evaluation is an integral part of the program, and so it should begin when the program begins and provide information to all participants throughout. Participatory action evaluation also has a formative impact on outcomes which auditing does not.

## 3 PAE is always formative.

- a All evaluation is formative in some ways, of course; even an evaluation which produces only subsequent summative judgements about a particular program will be formative for some people in the long run and wider sphere, and (assuming a report is disseminated) some other programs. Participatory action evaluation uses action inquiry processes (plan, act, evaluate) to shorten and localise this cycle, intentionally blurring any distinction between project development and evaluation (Tripp, 1980).
- b Participatory action evaluation is formative of both the program being evaluated and its own procedures. Formative evaluations work with moving research targets, and so need emerging processes rather than prescribed procedures. Participatory action evaluations therefore have a set of guiding principles (such as these) which direct on-going development of their procedures in the field in order to best produce, understand and improve program procedures and outcomes, staff knowledge and performance.

## 4 All evaluations rest on judgement, but in PAE it is only incidentally the judgement of the evaluator.

The evaluator's role is to facilitate program development through providing the various participants with an understanding of the program that will enable them to make good decisions based upon their sound judgements; the evaluator's judgements will be but a part of that understanding.

## 5 PAEs are overtly pluralistic

Because different participants have to make different judgements about different things in different ways and at different times. Participatory action evaluations also recognise that plurality invalidates closed generalisations — participatory action evaluations never conclude that something has been tried and it does or doesn't work. Their only certainty is that it did or did not work for these people in these terms under these circumstances.

## 6 PAE recognises that it is not politically neutral.

All inquiry is political because it is a matter of, Who gets to know (and to say) what about whom, to whom, when, how and why? In fact, all evaluation is doubly politicised — there are the politics of evaluation within the program which itself takes place in a political context; participation is a fundamental characteristic of democratic processes, so participatory action evaluation is a democratic process designed to produce democratic social change; being democratic it also aims to problematise and make its political agenda overt.

## 7 PAE evaluates itself

This is a process of self meta-evaluation, because in participatory action evaluations, meta-evaluation is not a primarily a summative judgement made by outsiders, but an on-going diagnostic form of practice. It is necessary because participatory action evaluations constantly change and improve their own processes, so they need to be kept on track more by frequent reference to their principles than their proposed implementation procedures. For instance, it is during the evaluation that one needs to check whether processes are fair and just to those being evaluated. This changes the usual meaning of terms such as evaluation 'design' and 'implementation', and perhaps makes their use in participatory action evaluation inappropriate. Self meta-evaluation is particularly important in terms of the above political question, and

## References

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## Acknowledgments

### Work that has informed these principles

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### Other assistance

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# **SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION EVALUATION FOR THE 1990s**

Produced for the evaluation of  
*The Trinity Youth Options Project*

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- 5 Participatory action evaluation is overtly pluralistic.**
- 6 Participatory action evaluation recognises that it is not politically neutral.**
- 7 Participatory action evaluation evaluates itself.**

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