

An evaluation of “Self -introduction” in the community engagement and involvement (CEI); A preliminary study based on participant observation

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Abstract

Community Engagement and Involvement (CEI) increases the value of research and has been promoted as a strategy for improving recognition and societal value for the community. Evaluation of CEI has been identified as a key component of research, especially in social science and health. The project, “Empowering people with Cutaneous Leishmaniasis: Intervention Programme to improve the patient journey and reduce Stigma via community Education” (ECLIPSE) is large-scale health and social intervention in rural Sri Lanka. It uses the approach of evaluation of CEI by establishing “Community Advisory Groups” (CAGs) at village settings. CAG members were purposefully selected from the relevant communities and included people with Cutaneous Leishmaniasis as well as key informants who could provide feedback on the implementation of the project work at the community level. The aim of the study was to describe and evaluate the process of “self-introduction” made by members of CAGs at initial meetings as a part of the CEI evaluation of the project. To accomplish this objective, an independent member of the research team carried out participant observation of the CAG meetings conducted at Katuyaya and Puwakwewa field sites in Anuradhapura district, Sri Lanka. The field notes of participant observation were analyzed using a framework approach based on UNICEF Minimum Quality Core Standards of CE. Study results suggested that people reflect their introduction by using the name, educational background, occupation, positions and roles in volunteer social organizations, family role, and willingness to contribute to the project. We observed that giving an opportunity to introduce themselves without a structured format creates power hierarchies within the group impeding “participation”, “inclusion” and “empowerment” which are core standards of CEI. The research team changed the approach of self-introduction at subsequent CAG meetings by asking to elaborate on current work engagement. The approach was successful and enhanced meaningful participation, minimized exclusion, and empowered members on collective action. It also revealed information on social organizations, social roles, and the social cohesion of communities. Thus, self-introduction in CAGs serves as a strong foundation for CEI. However, it should be carefully used by researchers so that undue power differences would not breach the core standards of CE.

Keywords: *Community advisory groups, community engagement and involvement, evaluation, participant observation, self-introduction*

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