

Designing and Implementing Accountability Strategies in Community Health Promotion: The SMART Fund case

**Marina Niks
Brian Evoy
Juan Solorzano
Daryl Kirpalani**



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Executive Summary

This report describes the accountability strategy that the Sharon Martin Community Health Fund (SMART) followed to establish a new monitoring structure for their funded projects. The report describes this strategy as consisting of three main elements: an outcomes based approach to evaluation, development of strong relationships with funded agencies and building the Fund's visibility and credibility through the creation of links with Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) and academia.

The researchers and writers of the report are part of the Partnering in Community Health Research (PCHR) program who had been working with SMART for two years to find ways of demonstrating the capacity building impact of the Fund's approach to evaluation. Data was collected through focus groups with funded agencies' staff and individual interviews with SMART's personnel, senior management and an evaluation consultant. The SMART's reference group participated in the design and analysis of the project by discussing and providing feedback to the project's approach, focus group and interview questions, initial findings, and report draft.

In 2001 the SMART Fund was facing budget cuts and structural changes. In anticipation of greater emphasis on accountability measures and procedures, the Manager, in consultation with a multi-sector reference group, developed strategic and business plans. To maintain the current funding and possibly secure additional core funding, SMART designed a strategy to demonstrate the value of the funded projects. To be consistent with their stated principles of capacity building, SMART designed an accountability strategy that would produce data related to the impact of the funded projects while developing capacity within the Fund and contracted agencies.

The first component of the accountability strategy was to choose an approach to evaluation. The Splash and Ripple approach to outcomes-based planning and management was chosen because it was assessed as the most accessible and meaningful for the non-profit agencies. The Splash and Ripple outcome measurement is an approach to planning, managing and evaluating projects that focuses on the impacts that programs are having as a result of their interventions. The framework describes the work of a community agency in terms of a series of interrelated inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes.

SMART staff describe the Outcomes Measurement Frameworks (OMF) as a very useful tool because it allows agencies and funders to better communicate the activities and impacts of the programs they fund. This

model shifts the emphasis from outputs (counting events, pamphlets, activities, participants, etc.) to outcomes (changes that result from the intervention), and focuses on social change as the main objective of the programs. Funded agencies' staff point out the limitations of this approach to evaluating health promotion work. These objections relate to confidentiality of the people who access services or attend workshops. Transient clients, for example, may prefer not to be associated with some of the services they used. One of the weaknesses of the OMF according to funded agencies' staff is that it not only fails to capture the stories behind the statistics, but it also minimizes the importance of the work being achieved through the programs. The perception of the OMF as a tool that fractures the experience of community agencies into pieces that do not necessarily fit together was shared by most of the focus group participants. However, they agree that the OMFs have allowed them to describe their work in brief and in clear language to different audiences.

The second component of the accountability strategy was to develop strong relationships with the funded agencies. These relationships were organized around three components: trust, training and ongoing support. SMART was described as an ally and a partner by funded agency's staff. Their everyday interactions reflect an alignment with similar goals and principles. One way in which these principles translate into practice is the development of training workshops and ongoing support for the newly implemented evaluation approach. All funded agencies were required to send at least one staff member to two two-day workshops to learn about Splash and Ripple and to develop the project's OMF. One-to-one support was also available from the evaluation consultant.

The third component of the accountability strategy was to develop SMART's visibility and credibility. An annual showcase of the funded projects and an explicit description of how they contribute to the vision of and services offered by VCH helped develop the visibility of the Fund within the larger set of services. In 2004 SMART entered a partnership with PCHR, a Canadian Institutes for Health Research and Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research funded program. This partnership presented an opportunity to share at an academic level the health promotion work that takes place in the community and to bring forward the arguments and develop the models that non-profit organizations have limited time and ability to articulate. It was expected that the academic validation would work as 'proxy' to demonstrate the interventions' effectiveness.

SMART also participated in meetings with other funders to share their strategy and to explore ways of making accountability processes simpler and more efficient for funded agencies who are often financially

supported by more than one organization. This attempt was seen as a relief by the funded agencies because there is a potential to use the same or similar frameworks and build on the work they have already done for SMART.

The report concludes with a series of recommendations presented in four categories: SMART; funding agencies considering instituting an accountability strategy; VCH, and; funders' tables

For SMART

Recommendation #1: Aggregate OMF results across agencies:

Where clusters of capacity building focus across several agencies – such as where several groups are supporting seniors, support the groups in adopting consistent measures. This will allow for cross-agency evaluation of different strategies designed to address the same issue.

Recommendation #2: Provide access to an evaluation specialist

Support the agencies and the collection of information by assigning an evaluation specialist to work on an ongoing basis with each agency. This support can alleviate the work that the agencies are experiencing without taking the monitoring work off their hands so that organizational capacity is still taking place. Surveys that ask participants to state whether they feel that a workshop was useful, whether their skills or knowledge have increased are of limited value to decision-makers. The evaluation specialist can make the collection of data more consistent across agencies and thus facilitate the collation of results at the Fund level.

For Funding Organizations Considering Instituting an Accountability Strategy

Recommendation #3: Develop and Sustain Trust

It is crucial for any funder who engages in an accountability strategy to include the funded projects as they move on the several steps towards a new evaluation structure. Strong relations can ensure buy-in for the new model, its goals and genuine commitment to the methods involved. The OMF as a tool on its own does not build relationships. An outcomes approach to evaluation will work best if embedded in a set of trusting relationships and commitment to shared goals.

Recommendation#4: Partnerships with Academia

Establish partnerships with academic units that have the capacity and resources to collect, analyse and report on data that funders and their funded organizations cannot take on.

For VCH

Recommendation #5: Engage public in discussions of health promotion

Explore ways of engaging the general public in understanding health promotion as long term social and cultural initiatives. Political awareness and civic support can cultivate increased financial and in-kind contributions targeted towards health promotion activities that can in turn increase decision makers' perceptions of the value of and pressure to support these interventions.

For Funders' Table

Recommendation #6: Streamline reporting requirement across funding bodies

Establish consistent reporting structures across funders.

Community based health promotion organizations are mainly interested in serving their clients. For them to dedicate the most resources to that task, additional tasks such as monitoring and reporting have to be meaningful and straightforward. When agencies have to report in different ways about different things to different funders, everyone loses because the energy spent in collecting data, analysing it and reporting on it is multiplied, taking time away from the clients. The efforts of SMART to bring together funders of community based health promotion and community capacity building programs has to be supported. Funders and the public all benefit when the agencies energies are dedicated to serving the clients well and having a streamlined method for reporting about this work.

This report describes the accountability strategy that the Sharon Martin Community Health (SMART) Fund¹ followed to establish a new monitoring structure for their funded projects. In particular, the report focuses on the perceived impact that SMART Fund's monitoring structure has had on non-profit agency management who must use outcome measurement frameworks to monitor and demonstrate program progress. The report does not intend to evaluate the strategy. It presents a description of the comments that those involved in implementing the strategy, VCH and SMART staff, consultant and funded agencies' personnel, shared with the researchers through individual interviews and focus groups.

I. Introduction

In the fall of 2004 SMART entered a partnership with the University of British Columbia through the Partnership in Community Health Research program (PCHR), a Canadian Institute for Health Research (CIHR) and Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research (MSFHR) – funded initiative. In this program, graduate students (academic learners) work together with community practitioners (community learners) and mentors to design and carry out research projects that are of interest to the community partners as well as provide research-training opportunities. Starting in January 2005, a team of academic and community learners and SMART staff started looking at ways to demonstrate the capacity building impact of the Fund. The group started with an analysis of the data collected through the progress reports that the funded agencies submit to the SMART Fund. After trying several ways of analyzing and coding the data using traditional qualitative research methods, it became clear that the data in the reports did not blend well with categories that could provide information about the impact of the Fund. The team kept exploring possible ways of producing evidence of community capacity building and enhanced health outcomes that result from the SMART Fund's efforts.

At a SMART Fund showcase in the spring of 2006, one senior VCH executive asked a panel of community practitioners about their experiences with and reflections on the outcomes based measurement frameworks approach to evaluation they had been engaged in for a few years. There was a silence and then a generalized nervous laughter. It was clear that the question had hit a chord for the funded agencies as well as for the SMART Fund staff. Seeing that that episode could be a representation of stories that needed to be told, two members of the

¹ SMART is a granting program of Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) with a 2.9 million dollar annual budget that supports 47 community capacity building projects.

PCHR/SMART team, Brian Evoy and Marina Niks, proposed to engage in a more formal research process to better understand the rationale and impact of the accountability strategy implemented by SMART with its funded projects. This would be one way to document the impact of the SMART Fund.

Brian and Marina developed a research proposal that was approved by SMART staff and their long-standing reference group.² After receiving approval from the UBC Ethics office, Brian and Marina started the data collection phase of the project. In September 2006 Daryl Kirpalani, a PCHR community learner joined the research team followed by Juan Gabriel Solorzano in January 2007. These four members of the team wrote and edited the report. SMART staff and the reference group reviewed drafts.

To contextualize the focus of the report, we start with a brief description of the current demands from the public of greater accountability processes in publicly funded institutions. In the second section we describe in more detail how we collected and analyzed the data. The third section of the report describes the findings organized around the accountability strategy implemented by SMART. The last section summarizes the major findings and offers a set of recommendations.

Trends in funders request for greater agency accountability

Whilst demands for funding from community agencies are ongoing, some authors have argued that public distrust of the use of public funds by governing agencies has been increasing (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Dryzek, 2000). The call for increased accountability and measurable results in the Canadian public sector has affected all publicly funded areas. In the health care sector, the public is becoming increasingly concerned that health care administrators are not being transparent and accountable to the public for their decisions with regards to health-related services and initiatives (Abelson & Gauvin, 2004, 2006). In a partial response to these concerns, Canadian health regions are instituting structures and practices that increase the transparency of their decision-making processes. These include establishing priority-setting frameworks, examining ethical dilemmas associated with funding decisions and producing publicly accessible performance measurement targets (Mitton & Donaldson, 2002; Vancouver Coastal Health, 2002).

² The SMART Fund Reference Group consists of representatives from several SMART funded agencies who provide the Fund with community-based advice with ongoing planning.

As publicly funded governing bodies contend with limited budgets, they have increased their emphasis on evaluating how effective and efficient the funded services are. Given public distrust, there is an identified need to monitor and evaluate funding decisions that are made on behalf of the public (Abelson & Gauvin, 2004). The not-for-profit sector has felt the impact of the increased requirements on their accountability structures. Community-based programs are increasingly being asked by their funders to demonstrate their success in terms of the results they bring about.

Logic models are widely used in fund-granting programs that are interested in explicitly demonstrating that change has occurred as a result of a program or initiative (Fielden et al, 2007). Logic models are tools that graphically describe the logical links between the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts of programs or other interventions. Logic models, it is argued, can organize planning, implementation and evaluation processes (Millar, Simeone & Carnevali, 2001) while showing how interventions result in specific changes.

Funding agencies have explored different strategies of collecting data about the impacts that their funds bring about. United Way, Kellogg Foundation and other major funders of community initiatives have favoured outcomes focused strategies. The SMART Fund acknowledges the need to demonstrate the value of the projects it Funds. To that end, it has also chosen an outcomes based framework as the approach to project planning, management and evaluation of their funded projects (SMART's website). All projects supported by the Fund are required to adopt an 'outcome measurement' framework (OMF). SMART recognizes that community capacity is challenging to measure due to it being a long term process and the fact that it is influenced by many factors outside of the control of the funded projects and the communities they serve. However, the Fund proposes that instituting an outcomes based approach to planning, managing and evaluating projects can strengthen community or organization capacity at the same time as it provides information to the funders (Coyne and Cox, 2004).

II. Methods

Data was collected from four stakeholder groups that were invited to provide their perspectives on the process of implementing the outcome measurement framework: SMART Fund employees, a program evaluation consultant who had been working with the Fund since 2002, SMART-

funded agency staff, and the Executive Director of VCH Primary Health Care Network (PHCN) -- who held overall responsibility for the SMART Fund during the period that the bulk of SMART Fund changes took place. The SMART Fund Reference Group, made up of multiple SMART funded agency representatives was consulted about the research approach, the focus group questions and initial analysis.

Three focus groups were held between July 19 and October 26, 2006. Invitations to funded agencies were sent by email and followed up by phone calls. A total of 17 participants attended three focus groups between July 19 and October 26, 2006. Focus group participants had been with their organizations between 1 year and over 20 years. Some of the participants represented projects that had received funding from the granting program that preceded SMART while others represented projects that have had SMART funding ranging from between 3 and 6 years. Of the 17 participants, 3 were male. A majority of the participants were directly responsible for their project, which involves tasks such as report writing, management of funds as well as providing direct service. Except for one participant, all had attended the training workshops provided by SMART. Most had also attended the Showcase events – an annual exposition of SMART-funded programs described in more detail on page 24.

Focus groups conversations were audio taped. Researchers also took notes of the discussions. Notes were reviewed and audio taped conversations were transcribed verbatim.

SMART Fund employees, the Executive Director of VCH's PHCN and the evaluation consultant were individually interviewed between December 2006 and March 2007. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts of the focus groups and the interviews were analyzed and used as the foundation for this report.

An initial analysis of the first two focus group discussions was shared with the SMART Reference group in November 2007. Notes were taken at the meeting and were included in the analysis represented here. The authors combined a qualitative descriptive research method with reflexive interpretations to highlight the co-constructed nature of the research process (Sandelowski, 2000; Fontana, 2003). QSR Nvivo software was used to open code the focus group transcripts (Charmaz, 2002).

Participants were engaged in the research process at several points: through a reference group that assisted in developing the research questions; by reviewing and editing their focus group transcript, and;

providing feedback on the emerging themes expressed through the open coding process. Individual interviews, focus group transcripts and supporting documents were triangulated as a way to bring into sharp focus moments where there are significant convergences and divergences of perspectives on the same series of events (Chenail, 1997).

To underscore and differentiate the different voices included in the report, direct quotations are highlighted in blue. The following codes have been used as a reference system for direct quotations included in this report:

IIP - Individual Interview Participant

FG - Focus Group

In the next section we present a detailed description of the findings that emerged from the analysis described above.

III. SMART's Accountability Strategy

Background

The SMART Fund, initially called the Community Health Initiative Fund (CHIF) was started in 1997 by Sharon Martin and other executive members of the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board [V/RHB] to support community capacity development in health promotion. The funds that supported these projects came from the V/RHB operating budget, rather than from money raised from endowments.

In the fall of 2001, the Ministry of Health Services amalgamated 52 health regions into 5 geographically based and one provincially based region (Ministry of Health, 2001). V/RHB was disbanded and VCH became the entity that took its place with an expanded geographical area. VCH started its first year with a large deficit. In order to demonstrate that they were participating in alleviating the deficit, VCH senior executive made the decision to cut services and programs. The SMART Fund was required to reduce their overall budget by 25%. In anticipation of impending structural changes and expectations for greater accountability resulting from provincial changes in government, the V/RHB Executive Director responsible for the SMART Fund embarked on a process of requiring all SMART-funded projects to develop accountability measures.

The operational review recommended that the SMART Fund develop a strategic plan informed by multi-sector input. To do this, the coordinator established a reference group made up of representatives from some of the different non-profit organizations funded by SMART, other funders,

academic researchers and other key leaders within VCH who understood the links between the community health promotion and capacity development focus of SMART funded projects and the health care services provided by VCH. Based on the Reference Group's input, strategic and business plans were developed in an effort to demonstrate the SMART Fund's value.

To be able to maintain their current funding and possibly secure additional core sustainable funding, SMART designed a strategy to demonstrate the value of the projects they fund. In other words, there had to be evidence that the projects were in fact producing positive outcomes associated with the criteria of the Fund so that SMART could link these outcomes to the VCH strategic priorities. The accountability strategy would allow SMART to demonstrate the value of the capacity building initiatives funded by VCH, as well as argue the need for additional funding.

A Particular Approach to Evaluation

The value of the interventions funded by SMART had to be aligned with the larger vision of VCH. In 2002, VCH was articulating their strategies based on "return on investment" principles. To fit VCH's vision as well as the prevalent discourse in health promotion and other government funding mandates, SMART's accountability strategy focused on outcomes. "We wanted to be able to respond to the senior decision makers who had that mentality of saying 'What are the outcomes we're getting for the money?' They weren't as interested in process; they weren't as interested in short-term outcomes. They really wanted to know 'What was the return on our investment?' So that really drove us toward the outcomes side of the equation" (IIP#4).

However, in choosing an outcome-based framework, SMART Fund employees also considered how the new tools could be of use not only for the agencies' projects funded by SMART but also for the other work the agencies were doing. The restructuring process was used as an opportunity to develop evaluation and monitoring capacity within the Fund and contracted agencies. And so the outcome-based framework was articulated as a community capacity tool as much as an evaluation tool. "A tool that could potentially support the non-profit sector find ways to present themselves in an effective way in the power relations they engage in to seek sustainability. Using terms like 'social return on investment', for example, and examining what they mean [not only] in a community, but [also] within society as a whole, and how the Fund and

the agencies can demonstrate the social return became part of the strategy” (IIP #1).

The Splash and Ripple approach to outcomes-based planning and management was chosen because it was assessed as the most accessible and meaningful for the non-profit agencies. It allowed for the process to start with current understandings that the projects had about outcomes. The Splash and Ripple outcome measurement is an approach to planning, managing and evaluating projects that focus on the impacts that programs are having as a result of their interventions. The framework describes the work of a community agency in terms of a series of interrelated inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes (Coyne, & Cox, 2004). Its structure reveals the connections between the resources needed to create results (inputs), activities, deliverables (outputs) and desirable impacts (outcomes). The framework also presents the indicators needed to assess the impacts of the project or program (Coyne and Cox, 2004).

What is Outcomes-Based Planning and Management?

Outcomes-based planning and management provides a “coherent and systematic set of tools for supporting collaborative planning, making management decisions and establishing an evaluation process” (Coyne, & Cox, 2004). According to the SMART Fund, this approach allows organizations to clarify expectations of project activities; identify target populations; collect information effectively; improve projects based on the right feedback; communicate results more effectively; reflect on the experience of the stakeholders; and provide evidence of the impacts of the project (Coyne, & Cox, 2004).

SMART funded projects are required to develop an outcome measurement framework (OMF) as part of their granting contract. The document is used by the organization during the planning, implementation and reporting phases of the project. They also develop a monitoring plan that describes the outcomes, indicators, methods of collecting information by who and when.

The annual report that the SMART Fund collects from its funded agencies presents the results for the outcomes identified in the OMF, collected using the monitoring plan indicators and methods.

An organization's OMF and monitoring plan is ultimately approved by the agency's Manager or Executive Director (and the not for profit board if applicable) as part of the contract with the SMART Fund. In most cases,

the program or project coordinator is responsible for the development of the OMF with varied degrees of consultation with other stakeholders.

Advantages of Outcome-Based Planning and Management

SMART staff and focus group participants agree that there are many benefits to using this approach, particularly having articulated OMFs. SMART staff describes the OMF as one very useful tool to define and report much of the work of the agencies. It shows the logic behind the allocation of resources, the selected activities and the achieved outcomes.

One of the arguments articulated by SMART in favour of using this tool is that it allows agencies and funders to better communicate the activities and impacts of the programs they fund. This model shifts the emphasis from outputs (counting events, pamphlets, activities, participants, etc.) to outcomes (changes that result from the intervention), and focuses on social change as the main objective of the programs. According to SMART, outcome evaluations encourage and allow funders and community organizations to focus on what matters most:

It's about an interaction that happens and social change that occurs, 'what are you doing and what are you changing? What social change are you creating?' All of a sudden the language changes quite a lot and people say, 'Yeah, that's what we are about. We are trying to do things to create social change and we want to make sure that the activities that we're doing are creating the social change that we want to bring about' (IIP#3).

Funded agencies' staff emphasize the benefit of having their plans in clear language. One-page tables summarize the goals, activities and results of projects. Some participants described that this was the only funder that was dedicating resources to capturing data about outcomes and impacts in a more rigorous way and that this developed the capacity of their organizations to do the same thing with other funders. Participants at the focus groups agreed that OMFs worked very well in their contracts with SMART because the OMFs describe what they are agreeing to for the fiscal year and how it fits SMART's and VCH's visions.

Focus groups participants described that developing OMFs allowed them to more accurately align the resources and the expected outcomes for their projects. One person, for example, said that the OMF made them realize that they were "promising too much" and consequently they

realigned the activities and expected outcomes with the resources they receive. For others, the exercise allowed them to more clearly see how much they were achieving through their work and this in turn brought about a sense of pride and satisfaction.

The OMF summaries, participants described, are also useful when communicating with different people about their projects. Many participants described using the OMF with potential funders. In one example case, a funder decided to provide funds based only on the OMF the agency had prepared for SMART. "I've whipped the OMF out to the City and a couple of times they said, 'you guys have been doing that? That's great! We're going to fund that now.'" It's really helping us attract some more money when the money's there" (FG#2).

Funded agencies have used the OMFs to communicate with other stakeholders. Some have used it to describe their work to the board. Others have used it with volunteers. In some cases the OMFs were used to describe the project for fundraising purposes. In other cases it was used as a way to monitor the project every six months by agency management and staff, for example.

Even when, to a different degree, all participants were able to describe some or many benefits of the OMFs, they also had reservations about the tool. OMFs, they argue, have some intrinsic limitations in terms of what type of information they capture, how they capture the information and how well they represent the work that the agencies are doing. In the next paragraph we describe these concerns.

OMF Limitations

Staff at Vancouver Coastal Health recognized the limitations of an outcome measurement approach, particularly in the field of population health and health promotion. The biggest challenge they describe is capturing the cause-effect relationship between an intervention and a short-term impact.

Everybody's trying to become more outcome focused. It's particularly hard in the public health area or the health promotion area where your intervention takes a long time to have an outcome and there are many other variables that affect the outcome. It's very difficult to do. So lots of people in the prevention and health promotion areas do not pursue it. They say, 'you can't do it; it's too hard to do.' In the more acute side of things they tend

to be able to do an intervention, and then something happens. Like you do a hip surgery; person's recovered. But they don't necessarily look at it in the long-term still. Their outcomes are defined. They're still fairly short-term outcomes, but they tend to be able to get away with that (IIP#4).

While some agencies have adjusted to the change in reporting mechanisms and have embraced the use of the outcomes-based planning and management, many others have been more reluctant. Some feel that the funders' push for developing outcome evaluations reveals a change in a relationship of trust that existed before this process was required.

I'm really disappointed to hear that [the evaluation requirement] is going this way because wherever I've worked money was always the discretionary. They trusted us. They were strategic. They weren't throwing their money away and not being accountable, but they knew that you needed that money without strings attached (FG#3).

For some, there was a sense of anxiety of what the new reporting process would entail given the limited administrative capacity for adjusting to these changes. Initially, some agencies look at the OMF as “a game [we have] to play to get the funding;” the new monitoring process was perceived as “another requirement to demonstrate that [we] are credible and are actually achieving the goals [VCH] has set” (FG#3). Others say that even today they cannot understand the language in the logic models and they would need to be “translated” for them to use it in their planning and monitoring.

I like her idea to translate our framework into real language. It would have been really, really helpful for me because I probably will even look at it right now and even though I've redone it, I don't even really know what it means and how we can incorporate it. It should be incorporated into our program and used more. But because I don't understand it and obviously no one else really understands what's going on with it (FG#2).

Participants at the focus groups described several limitations of outcomes-based planning and management. Some concerns refer to the ability to collect data to inform the framework such as issues with confidentiality and fit with the actual service being provided. Other objections relate to the kind of information that the OMF represents. Here we look at these points in detail.

Confidentiality

Some of the community organizations considered that collecting the information needed for an outcome evaluation could compromise the confidentiality of the people who access their services or attend their workshops. In particular, collecting information on medium and longer term outcomes proved to be difficult to organizations serving transient clients who would prefer not be associated with some of the services they used: "Some of the outcome they want to know about are that follow-up piece. Did somebody get off the streets? Did somebody get into education? And there are people who, when they close the door of the agency, they want that door closed" (FG# 3).

Fit with service provided

For some of the agencies the process of collecting outcome data felt out of proportion to what the program was delivering to the clients. For example clients coming to a program for something very specific such as a bowl of soup, felt overwhelmed by the questionnaires that were being used to collect feedback information.

Collecting the information needed for the monitoring plan is indeed not always a straightforward process. Some of the agencies have found it difficult to collect the data on an ongoing and systematic basis. Staff at community organizations are often responsible for many aspects of the program and the request to collect this information not only seems artificial but it often results in an additional burden:

What we find really challenging is that I have phone calls from people. I'm going from one thing to the other to the other. I forget to put a little tick box. I forget to say to somebody, 'well did you get what you needed from this phone call' (FG# 3).

Capturing the "Whole Story"

At the focus groups, there was agreement related to the ability of the monitoring plan to collect information in a way that may be useful for senior management who "wants it in a capsule" (FG# 3), but participants said the OMFs do not tell the whole story. According to the participants, one of the weaknesses of the OMF is that it not only fails to capture the stories behind the statistics, but it also minimizes the importance of the work being achieved through the programs:

You can say eleven of twelve participants came today and then out of those 11 participants, 86% indicated that they thought the SMART Fund was successful so that's what we do, that's what we're

relating, but does that really go to the heart of what we do? It's showing numbers; it's showing statistics. That's very powerful in one sense. It's not the whole story. It's very tiny, but it ends up being very important. So when people write the report they say, 'well that's too tiny, it should be a little bigger, shouldn't it?' There's this feeling that somehow you've got to make it bigger, because there's no value seen in tiny (FG# 3).

The perception of the OMF as a tool that fractures the experience of community agencies into pieces that do not necessarily fit together was shared by most of the focus group participants. The OMF itself is regarded as incapable of capturing the work that community agencies actually do:

The measurement framework takes slices and people who work in the community always look at things as a whole (FG# 3).

It didn't feel like I was really able within the framework to capture all of the pieces. That area of reductionism I found very evident. Even if you're serving meals, you're not doing the same thing for everybody, even if it's all the same recipe, because there are different effects on people (FG# 3).

We see everything that you do as important. All the pieces work together. It's not this here, this here, this here. Right? And the framework holds together, but all of the work that we do is rich because it's the whole tapestry, not the different threads we report out (FG# 3).

SMART has been working on the use of stories as an outcomes measurement tool in an attempt to capture outcomes in a richer, more appropriate manner. As part of this initiative, agencies were offered the opportunity to participate in digital storytelling workshops, and in April 2007, SMART organized a conference, *Our Stories: Demonstrating Change through storytelling* (<http://www.vch.ca/smart/conference/>). The data for this report was collected before agencies had an opportunity to participate in these events and therefore any impressions and reflections about the storytelling initiative are not represented here.

Balancing Elements of the Accountability Strategy

The implementation of outcome-based planning and management was one part of a larger strategy implemented by SMART. Interviewees agreed that while senior management are impressed with the implementation of outcome-based planning and management, they still

feel that the data collected is “soft”. Quantitative reporting appears to hold more value than qualitative data for demonstrating achieved outcomes. Taking this into account, the overall strategy SMART developed was to work with the agencies to implement, maintain and strengthen the monitoring and reporting structures, and at the same time, work with VCH, funders and academia to develop more visibility and credibility. In the next section, we describe the different aspects of the strategy.

The choice of the Splash and Ripple approach to outcomes evaluation was one aspect of a broader strategy to justify the Fund and the projects it supports. As described earlier, SMART’s strategy to implement an evaluation structure stems from the need to show that the outcomes of the funded projects contribute to VCH’s overall goals. If the data that the agencies report on was not perceived by senior management as “rigorous” enough, then SMART had to develop other ways of demonstrating the value of their work. One VCH staff described the elements that decision makers look for as “proxies of effectiveness” when assessing the value of a program: good management, ongoing evaluation, transparency, networking and use of evidence in program’s decision.

One of the things that decision-makers are looking for when they fund stuff is at least a sense of confidence that there’s good management in place, that there is evaluation going on and that the program is trying to use evidence in its decision making. So these are sort of proxies of effectiveness, and just being able to demonstrate that you are putting in place strong evaluation components, that there’s good management, that there is an openness and a networking going on, that there is transparency, so that you’re not needing to hide things or do things under the table that may be a rip off, and the money’s not going anywhere improperly. So it’s open and transparent. That brings a confidence level that then spills over into decision-making” (IIP#4).

The strength of some elements can balance the weakness of other elements. As described previously, the SMART accountability strategy incorporated a strong evaluation component through the OMF. However, the perceived weakness of the “soft” data reported by the agencies is balanced with other elements in the overall accountability design. The other elements of the SMART strategy, the development of strong relationships with the funded agencies and building the visibility and credibility of SMART’s evaluation approach, worked to strengthen the

position of the Fund within VCH and consequently that of the funded agencies.

Relationships with funded agencies

The fact that funded agencies would have to report on their outcomes in a more structured way was a given. To make sure that the transition and implementation of the OMF were successfully carried out, the Fund's coordinator focused on developing and strengthening the relationships between the Fund and the funded agencies. The goal of this attention was, according to VCH staff, to ensure that the community organizations believed that ["the funder really values and acknowledges and recognizes the work that's being done"](#) (IIP#1).

This approach is recognized to be one of the key ingredients for the success of the strategy. ["\[The strategy\] engaged the recipients of the Fund. It really tried to a\) Build their capacity, and b\) understand their perspective. And that was what made \[the strategy\] more successful. What was different \[from other evaluation strategies\] was that SMART Fund applied its philosophy of engagement and went and talked to the community, educated them about the importance of this. First of all, \[SMART\] tried to understand from their point of view how it might work, and then actually supported the work to be done. So it was the engagement piece that made the difference. And made it more meaningful"](#) (IIP#4).

By attending to the key concerns of the agencies and involving them in the transition process, SMART Fund staff trusted the concern for the upcoming operational changes would be reduced and the agencies would be more supportive of the process. Regarding the relationships with the funded agencies, SMART's strategy focussed on three main components: trust, training and ongoing support.

Trust

The process of gaining the trust of the funded agencies started with a group meeting where the coordinator presented the context and values within which SMART and the agencies would have to operate. They were informed that each project was going to be evaluated using common criteria. Funding decisions would be made as soon as possible to alleviate stress with projects being informed about future funding in person. Funded agencies were informed that SMART would ["support \[the agencies\] in whatever way we could."](#) The emphasis was placed on the 'good will' rather than on the new requirements as 'hoops to be jumped' (IIP#1). During this period, the SMART Fund made the commitment not to seek

additional funds to grow SMART from sources to which the non-profit societies also had access.

The trust being built was expected to be reciprocal so that the relationships would be considered partnerships between the funder and the funded organizations. By being transparent with the agencies, the SMART Fund expected the agencies to do the same in an effort to gain a clear understanding of what was happening in the community. The focus was not only on justifying the Fund to the senior executive but also to improve the programs “for the community as a whole and for their own organizations (IIP#1).” Ultimately, the position coming from SMART Fund was that “we were on the line and if we didn’t work together nobody was going to survive this difficulty, and I think that message got out” (IIP#1).

Participants at the focus group shared their perspective on the relationships they have with SMART. All participants praised the work of SMART as a funder. One characteristic that was emphasized was that of “flexibility.” Agencies feel that with SMART they can go back and explain why they had to change the original plans. While other funders would have had a hard time accepting changes. SMART “was really open to the unexpected. [They] trusted us to totally re-jig our project. And [because of] that flexibility, two years later [the project] is very successful. But [SMART] understood, it wasn’t ‘you’re doing it wrong’ or ‘it’s your fault’”(FG #3).

SMART was described as an ally in the community work that the agencies perform. Many participants explained that the fund’s success is directly related to the people who work there, describing them as “willing to be flexible and deal with the things as they arise, [if they weren’t,] we really would have trouble! I’m sure [they] must have had incredible frustrations with some of us cowboy agencies that are pretty hard to rope in. And yet we all want to go to the same place” (FG 3). Two focus group participants described the relationships between SMART and the funded agencies as community development/engagement. “I’m not new to this business and I know what’s out there, and I know when you find gold you are fortunate” (FG #1). Some participants said they feel loyalty towards the people who work for the Fund. One participant summed up their feelings towards this funder by saying: “I’m a SMART dog. You rang the bell and here I am” (FG #1).

All participants were grateful for the opportunity to share their experiences with the researchers in this project and they thought this was one more indication of how supportive SMART is of their work. “This is huge; this focus group is a great idea. I think this is really good. Once again, SMART has

come up with another good way to get feedback. They are not telling us what's going to happen. It's about how we can make things work together" (FG #2).

As any relationship between funders and grantees, the relationship between SMART and its agencies has many complexities. One participant described the relationship as a dance where the agencies support SMART's work and the Fund in turn supports their work. Participants at the focus group as well as SMART staff brought up the nuances of this relationship by acknowledging that, after all, the funders are the ones deciding who gets how much money. "[As] much as I feel that most people are open and honest with me I know that there are some, maybe most, who censure themselves based on the dollars. And I know there are some who censure themselves a lot" (IIP#2).

SMART strengthened its relationships with the funded agencies by developing trust as described above. Another important aspect of this relationship was that of building the capacity of the individuals and organizations.

Capacity building

One of the other main features of the approach that SMART took to instituting an OMF was to focus on developing the capacity of the funded agencies and SMART Fund staff. The vision was not one of a restricted funding process but one where any opportunity to develop capacity was used in informal as well as more formal steps. Below, we describe the three aspects of the formal steps SMART took to develop the capacity and individuals engaged in the SMART accountability strategy.

Training the agencies

The most structured aspect of the emphasis on capacity development within the agencies was the institution of Splash and Ripple training workshops. The first workshop was offered in February 2003. The workshops were structured based on previous experiences with Heritage Canada and non-profit agencies in Calgary and in Edmonton.

All funded agencies were required to send two people to the two day-long sessions where participants could learn, engage and share the new evaluation framework language. The need for two people to attend was based on the knowledge that there is typically a high turnover of staff at community-based agencies and SMART's desire to assure that the capacity that was developed stayed in the agency for a longer period of time.

These workshops were facilitated by a consultant and were offered twice a year. Over time, these ongoing sessions were brought in-house and facilitated by SMART Fund employees. From one interview participant's perspective, what makes the workshops work is the "fact that they were hands-on support, done in a staged way. Trying to do it slowly so that people get comfortable with it. Proving an understanding of what's going to happen in the future. Checking anxieties as best we could. All of these things were a very positive way of going about it" (IIP#2).

In general, funded agency staff that participated in the training appreciated the hands-on support and training provided to them by SMART. They indicated that they were satisfied with the content, format and facilitation of the workshops. Participants at the focus groups talked about how the workshops allowed them to understand the approach to outcomes evaluation, to "get it". Particularly, participants referred to learning the language and conceptualization of OMFs. The work in small groups on actual projects allowed the participants to network and build on each other's diverse experiences and skills. Some participants also described how the workshops allowed them to "really think about what [we've] been doing when [we've] been just doing it" (FG#1). One participant found that the workshop allowed her to realize that she had initially developed project outcomes that were too ambitious.

"We had a week in between sessions and I went back, worked with the staff and said, 'I can't believe we agreed to all this; this is like not telling the story correctly and it's just the moon.' [We] worked it back down. Got a lot of input from [SMART consultant s] on it in the weeks after and were able to go back to SMART and say 'this is making more sense for us.' This is what we feel is [what] we truly do and we can have a lot of success with it. So that was an unexpected benefit" (FG #2).

While some people appreciated the step-by-step process and the group building activities, others felt that some of the process was a waste of time. Regarding the ice breaker, "I don't have time for party games. I don't need to bond with people I'll never see again or if I see them it's because I work with them in [the] community. I sat through a whole morning of that and then I actually had to go in the afternoon because I had wasted so much time in the morning" (FG#1).

Ultimately, participants agreed that the differences in opinions were related to different experiences, skills, knowledge about OMFs as well as learning styles and the length of time they were involved with the agency and with the Fund. "All agencies are in different places. I'm fairly new to

the work that I'm doing. I'm learning all the time. I needed 2 days 3 years ago to get my head around this. Just like our folks that we're serving are all very different, the agencies that SMART is trying to build capacity with are all in a very different place and so [using a] cookie-cutter approach in terms of our learning doesn't work" (FG#2).

Many participants said they would have liked more opportunities to work individually with the workshop facilitators. A few participants had that experience and described it as very useful. During the individual interview with the SMART Fund coordinator, it was revealed that all funded agencies were offered the opportunity to contact the SMART Fund consultant and work with her on their OMFs. While some participants couldn't recall the offer, others acknowledged that it had indeed been made but they never acted on it.

Many focus group participants expressed the concern that involvement in the training took them away from their work with no ability to back-fill their position with another employee.

For me it just comes back again to recognizing the usefulness but trying to balance it against how much time should I be devoting to this. You can see the benefit of it but how much of my time should I be devoting to that when [the SMART funded project] is such a small [piece of my work]? (FG#3)

In some cases, even with additional resources, the agency would not have been able to replace a particular worker because of the specialized role they play in the organization. In other cases, they would choose to direct these additional resources towards maintaining services "because we want to stretch the dollar as far as we can stretch it" (FG#2).

While acknowledging that the amount of time and resources that the agencies devote to the training is "the most difficult" aspect of the process, SMART staff consider that there was a need to create "a space for something that really was a very new paradigm for most non-profits" (IIP#1). Now that most of the agencies have developed their frameworks, they are reconsidering the need for the two-daylong workshops to make them shorter. Also, since an in-house employee has facilitated the workshops, the content has been broadened to include other aspects of the funding relationship such as sharing information about deadlines and report preparation.

Training and supporting staff

The capacity building approach of the accountability strategy permeated not only the work with the funded agencies but also the work with staff within SMART. A SMART Fund team member describes how another team member puts into practice what may otherwise be an abstract notion of capacity development:

I think that [there's] a deep desire to support the work that I'm doing. To be open and available to ideas, to thoughts, to points of view. To encourage pushing boundaries in different ways. To be available for what at times felt like endless questions from me. She's got an amazing resource of knowledge that she is very willing to share. And the decisions are made in a collaborative way. There's a real feeling that my inclusion in this is very important, and that when she's thinking things through it's done as a group. It's all these little pieces that come together. And there's also a certain belief in my capacity (IIP#2).

Ongoing Support

The third aspect of the relationships that SMART has built with funded agencies is that of ongoing support. After the workshops, there is individual follow-up, in a 1-to-1 format. This exchange takes place mostly over email or on the phone but there are also many site visits to work on the frameworks. Projects would refine their OMFs and send them to the SMART Fund team who would make comments and send them back to the agencies.

There is also an interest in facilitating relationships among agencies to allow them to interact and connect as a support strategy to ease anxieties and fears triggered by the evaluation processes. The workshops and showcase events (see below), are two ways in which SMART opens up spaces for funded agencies to come together to learn from and support each other.

One activity that focus group participants highlighted was the site visits. They feel that when SMART staff comes to the program, SMART has an opportunity to learn what “really goes on.” They also see these visits as recognition of the programs' value, “[The] SMART Fund knows in real life what we do. It is a beautiful thing [that they come to the program]” (FG #2). They would like to see more site visits, from SMART and from other VCH staff and to receive more feedback on their reports. However, these tasks take time and with over fifty projects to manage, SMART's staff is spread thin. A SMART Fund employee emphasized that, “it's very important not to underestimate the amount of time and energy and

resources that are required to [support the projects] effectively. It requires a lot of support and it requires a good relationship to be done well. You can implement it with a workshop and no relationship, but it just won't work as well" (IIP#2). SMART staff considers that to sustain the kind of relationships they want to maintain with the agencies, they would need at least one staff for 20 funded projects, especially when the projects are long time funded ones.

One of the things that slows us down is just the volume of work. I have 50+ projects that are reporting, getting through those reports, looking at them in an historical context in terms of their progress, as well as what they're doing and how it's connected to their outcome framework. And then working with them to say, 'Ok. Next year let's look at something that's going to be a better indicator or maybe we can tighten your outcomes'. [That work] times 50 has been enormous, quite apart from all the other stuff that we're doing. Having more staff capacity to address that would get us to the place that [we need to be at] (II#2).

SMART has been contracting with a Community Developer within VCH to assist in the review process of progress reports and OMFs.

The SMART Fund has developed a collaborative relationship with its funded agencies. This relationship is based on a joint commitment to shared principles about health promotion. Reference Group members describe it as a "walking the talk" attitude where SMART staff interacts with funded agency staff in a respectful and collaborative manner. They assert that it is in this context that the work on OMF's is contextualized and is effective. Whereas for other funders the development of a logic model is just an exercise, for SMART it is one more tool for the collaborative relationship.

Take an OMF and lay it on somebody. It won't be very valuable because it is not done in a way that is going to help you out. Or take an OMF and build capacity. This is the only way it will work well (RG # 2).

As described above, the SMART accountability strategy involved a clear focus on outcome evaluation and the development of strong relationships based on trust and capacity development at individual and organizational levels for both funded agencies and SMART itself. We now turn to the third element of the accountability strategy, increasing the Fund's credibility and visibility.

Building SMART's visibility and credibility

To develop the Fund's visibility and credibility, the accountability strategy involved engaging both internal and external partners. SMART's approach focused on explicitly drawing connections with the vision of and services offered by VCH, establishing linkages with other funders and establishing relationships with academia. The following section presents a fuller depiction of these different elements.

Linkages to VCH

SMART has a complex set of relationships with VCH. VCH finances and administers the SMART Fund and therefore SMART must be accountable for these resources. SMART also competes with other programs within VCH for limited funding dollars and therefore has to make sure their work is recognized.

During the interviews, SMART staff referred to the need to articulate the linkages between the outcomes the SMART funded projects achieve and VCH's mandate. SMART attempts to make visible and formalize the links between the community programs they fund and the services VCH provides so that there is more integration of programs and services. They do this by making presentations to executive management and by participating in VCH sponsored events such as conferences and workshops. Another way of making those links visible is by showcasing the work of the funded projects to VCH staff and senior management. SMART has dedicated considerable resources to an annual gathering. These events are described below.

Annual Showcase

The annual showcase is the main venue intended to raise the SMART funded projects' exposure. VCH senior executives, board members and other funders are invited to learn more about the work of the agencies through displays and selected speakers. According to VCH staff, the showcase serves several purposes: 1) it shows the executives what SMART funded health promotion activities are happening in the community; 2) it illustrates to other funders what work SMART does in the hopes of finding additional sources of funding; and, 3) it celebrates with the projects their work and its achievements.

The showcase event has been conducted in a semi-formal location used for many professional conferences. This location has been chosen with care. It is part of staging the projects in a "more professional manner but also a comfortable atmosphere. Invitations are sent to all the senior executive staff and to the members of the VCH Board of Directors and

program directors who have responsibility for community health services. Each showcase has a theme that aligns with VCH's strategic directions. Within the chosen theme, specific projects are identified to participate on a group panel. Identified panel participants are considered by SMART to be inspiring and able to speak in an accessible way to the variety of people who come to the showcase in terms of language, focus, and politics. One SMART Fund staff believes that even though the event adds more work, it has been of great benefit to the agencies and has helped increase SMART's profile within VCH (IIP#2).

For SMART, the showcase provides a means of emphasizing strong aspects of their accountability structure that can help strengthen what can be seen as weaker elements. With the showcase, the Fund can demonstrate that the projects are reporting annually on their processes and impacts.

The showcase got some of the senior decision makers out because it's a community event. It's not their normal decision making place. But they get exposure to the softer side of the program, the stories and the anecdotes and that kind of stuff, which is good. They buy into that. But they also see the process of these groups trying to be rigorous and they value that. They think, 'Ok. We may not know the answers yet. We may not have the measurement yet. But, they are actually trying to do it.' So they feel good seeing the projects. So even though they don't necessarily have hard data, this is the right thing to be doing. It's protected SMART. It's made SMART of value, but it hasn't yet translated into, 'We want a whole bunch more of money.' Which is kind of where we want to get to eventually (IIP#4).

And while they have been successful at having high-level staff, executive directors, and Vice President's open the showcase event through the years, it has been challenging to get more VCH people to attend. Out of the approximately 200 people who attend, about 15 are VCH staff.

The comments from focus group participants about the showcase are mixed. Many say they enjoy seeing the diversity of projects and going through the materials from other agencies. One participant described the event as "powerful" because it gives people a "chance to be proud and see how they're doing good work" (FG #3). This comment highlights the idea that positive feedback may not be routinely received by agencies in the social services sector, unless it comes from peers.

Others question the effectiveness of the event. They indicated that it is just the agencies talking to each other. "If they're wanting to increase public awareness and understanding, then they've got to get the general

public into here somehow. Give me an audience. Put me in a tent at the PNE and I'll tell everybody how we can slice and dice and give you curly fries for dinner. I don't care! But do more than just talk to the converted" (FG #3).

Some focus group participants addressed the amount of time it takes to prepare and attend the event. This time and resources are, again, taken away from working in their projects. They consider it a cost that should somehow be acknowledged and perhaps financially built into the contracts.

Many focus group participants can see the strategy underpinning the showcase. One participant said she could "almost hear [the SMART Fund coordinator's] script" (FG#2). But they are puzzled by the fact that VCH executives that attends the events seem to understand their work, "they speak profoundly about the importance of the work that we all do and say that they support a more innovative way of monitoring and reporting outcomes. Everybody stopped in their tracks and said, 'wow these stories are incredibly powerful'. I think it was an antidote to the fact that we had got too [obsessed] with the framework" (FG#2). Yet, there is an overpowering sense that VCH senior executives require hard data to maintain the current funding.

If at every showcase there's someone from a position of power and authority within the healthcare system who speaks these words, why is there such a need on behalf of the SMART Fund to justify the work that we do? There's mixed messages that are happening here, because we've got these words that come every year to us about how important the work that we do is and then we have to justify the work that we do to ensure that the funding continues, which is a bit crazy, to say the least (FG#2).

SMART Fund employees and their consultant all agree that SMART is seen as a leader in working with contracted agencies and believe that they are recognized as one of the only programs that consistently demonstrates a monitoring strategy that is well integrated into all their programming. This recognition has allowed SMART to get additional resources to conduct pilot projects. According to VCH staff, the VCH Board of Directors is also appreciative and impressed with the work that's been done. The SMART Fund consultant, for example, has been invited to do training for other VCH programs. Another indicator of the appreciation for their work is that a hospital foundation has accepted SMART as one recipient of their fundraising efforts.

Although there are indications of the appreciation of their work by VCH management, SMART staff recognize that it has been harder to measure the impact of a health promotion approach. Focus group participants suggest that their work is hard to measure and that upper management should visit them to appreciate the work being done and its impact. SMART staff believes that for VCH to not only secure the current funding but also increase it, SMART must find ways to prove that health promotion interventions have a cost effective impact. To that end, SMART has started to work with other funders and with PCHR, which is discussed in the following section of the report.

Working with other funders

According to SMART staff, the Fund has a responsibility to find other funders who would be willing to cost-share programs, especially in cases where “we have something that’s demonstrating success and communities depended upon it and so do our services, we have to find a way to support it” (IIP#1). To that end, the SMART Fund coordinator has been building relationships with other funders by sharing with them the Splash and Ripple model and by participating in multiple funder tables to explore the possibility of simplifying the monitoring and reporting structures.

The variety and complexity of the reporting requirements that each project has to work through was a definitive challenge for focus group participants.

All of us had that experience where we have met a multitude of funders and they all require something different. I spend hours on the phone trying to figure out what each means by an outcome. If you have [several funders], whether it's Ministry of Children and Family Development, or MIA or Health, why not come out with one kind of centralized system across your ministries. It makes tons of sense and it would be better in terms of the quality of data that would come back for the government. (FG#3)

Focus group participants had a lot to say about funders' requirements and increased accountability procedures. Although the criticisms were not directed at SMART but at funders in general, there were references to the role they would like SMART to play.

I can't believe how much work is topped onto organizations like neighbourhood houses who are small, who have to live off tiny little contracts and then you've got a gazillion of them to manage without any kind of financial understanding of what that means to

the smaller organizations. It's incumbent upon SMART because of its own philosophy around building community capacity to get on top of these points and say, 'we're going to have to build in an additional administration percentage' because they understand that. (FG#3)

Some participants were aware of the work SMART is attempting to do with other funders. Many knew that other funders such as Vancity Foundation, Vancouver Foundation, United Way and the City of Vancouver are already implementing similar strategies as SMART. This is seen as a relief for those agencies that also have projects funded by these other funders because they can use the same or similar frameworks and build on the work they have already done for SMART.

Focus group participants explained that some agencies welcome the fact that funders are starting to use a common language. This relative standardization of reporting mechanisms has allowed some agencies to use their plans and reports for more than one funder. The common language is helping to bring together not only funders and agencies, but is also building bridges among agencies themselves.

[The standardization of monitoring structures] makes it easier for us because it is not only [name of a co-worker] and I using that language, it is 30 people so you are sharing a culture about evaluation and planning, you are thinking in the same way. So when someone says, 'let's develop a proposal for the City of Vancouver,' I don't have to sit down and start from scratch (FG#1).

To strengthen the credibility of the accountability work that SMART and their funded agencies do, it became clear that there was a need for more rigorous knowledge. To that end, SMART established partnerships with academia.

Partnerships with academia

In the fall of 2004 the SMART Fund partnered with the Partnering in Community Health Research, a Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) and Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research (MSFHR) funded program. Fund staff explain that the partnership with academia was necessary to validate the work that SMART was doing.

We needed to have the academic brainpower to make this work because we didn't have it internally. We [VCH] think we can do research and evaluation. But I don't think we really can. We needed that academic brainpower to help us do this. (IIP#4)

The partnership presented an opportunity to share at an academic level the health promotion work that takes place in the community and to bring forward the arguments and develop the models that non-profit organizations have limited time and ability to articulate. One interviewee described that it was expected that the academic validation would work as 'proxy' to demonstrate the interventions' effectiveness. While the research project this report documents has been a step towards that direction, two interviewees agree that more needs to be done to demonstrate the value of health promotion work in general and of that carried out by the funded projects in particular. This kind of "proof" could be the most compelling reason to increase the funds allocated to health promotion initiatives.

The groundwork has been done. [Senior management] understand the program's trying to do something to prove itself, and if we've got [hard] data, the door will open for us with money. If we can show a) that there is a therapeutic impact, or b) a utilization of resources in the hospital impact, then people will say we should actually try to fund that. That kind of outcome is important for the decision makers right now because of the financial pressures. (II#4)

Academic researchers have a role to play in developing these measures, collecting and analyzing the data and publishing the results. One interviewee suggested that academic researchers could work with a group of funded projects that have a common theme, like isolated seniors for example. Bringing those projects together would allow them to share experiences and develop common outcomes and indicators. Academic researchers would lead a rigorous data collection and analysis on those indicators to establish the larger correlations between the local interventions and the regional savings and gains.

The documentation of regional impacts of health promotion interventions at regional levels is challenging to record, especially for community organizations whose main mandate is to offer services to clients rather than collecting and analyzing outcome information. It is worthwhile to explore other approaches to documenting these impacts. In particular, partnerships with the academy can result in fruitful collaborations where universities can offer resources and skills that can build the evidence necessary to strengthen the field of knowledge in health promotion while at the same time supporting community based services and programs.

We have so far described the overall accountability strategy implemented by SMART. This strategy encompassed three key elements: an outcomes measurement framework, development of strong

relationships and building the Fund's visibility and credibility. Focus group participants stated some concerns about the strategy. Some concerns are of a practical nature, such as the need of administrative support, and others are of a more political nature. The next section deals with those concerns that seemed to raise the most anxiety at the group discussions.

Challenges with strategy

Participants described several challenges with the evaluation and monitoring strategy. In many cases, the frustration voiced by participants referred to the need to monitor and report to funders in general rather than SMART in particular.

Other times, the challenges described by participants were not the responsibility of SMART. For example, participants complained about a lack of consistency in terminology across funding agencies. While more funders are requesting that community agencies conduct outcome evaluations, the terminology has not been standardized. Multi-funded agencies in particular resent the lack of standard terminology and reporting systems across different funders especially those with different reporting structures; the implementation of the OMF implied an additional challenge to their already overburden administrative capacity. One of the agencies perceived the OMF as “the most onerous, the most demanding, and in a way, the most counter-productive [requirements] because of the amount of work you have to do for SMART in proportion to the dollars received. It's incredible” (FG#3).

In a few cases, SMART reporting structure was perceived to create tensions within staff in multi-funded organizations as “[SMART's OMF] wants to shape how people are defining their reporting to its needs, but [managers] need them also to be able to do this, and this, and so, it does not create a good interface” (FG#3).

The process of implementing the OMF has been accompanied with high levels of frustration at the agency level given the difference in language used by SMART, the steep learning curves entailed in developing outcome measurement and the administrative costs of implementing and reporting on them. Staff working in community agencies does not necessarily share the language of outcome measurement, and many found it difficult to describe the work that they do in these terms. Some community practitioners described themselves as an “operational kinds of [persons]” for whom the outcome measurement approach appeared foreign and frustrating: “There are a lot of emotions around this because you start to resent the time you spend on this and not understanding what

you have to do and the language; you feel inadequate" (FG# 3). Other focus group participants echoed this sentiment.

In the beginning it was very challenging and certainly challenging for me and maybe for others as well in the sense that my background has been for many years in community work and to turn around and have to figure this out and put this together in a framework that felt to me totally alien to the work that we do and the way that we have been working with people. I find it a bit jarring every year to be there trying to count numbers and do that in terms of a measurement just because for me there's a clash between the methodology of the reporting and the methodology of the work (FG#3).

Most agencies agreed that the time allowed in the grants for administration purposes has not matched the increased requirements posed by outcome measurement frameworks that are required to be reported out to SMART Fund annually. This discrepancy between the administrative requirements and the available supports have forced staff from community agencies to work unpaid hours or utilize direct service time to collect information to include in the progress reports. It is the perception of some of the agencies that "no funder is going to fund all that time and energy... the kind of burnout that this process creates" (FG#3). While many of the participants that attended the focus group recognized that some funders, particularly SMART, have increased the funding allocated for administration, they pointed out that often this additional money is used at the executive director level and little remains available for the frontline staff that is responsible for conducting the OMF and reporting. One of the interviewees commented that:

The amount of time you have to pull your managers away from the support to their workers [...] you pay for in the end, and it's extremely hard to measure. If you are reducing that manager's time by a couple hundred hours from being able to do managing to do the reporting it diminishes your agency. It's very hard to quantify, but [...] I see the effect because of the amount of time we have to spend putting out fires that could have been put out sooner but nobody had time to deal with it when it was a small issue. The client complaints during a SMART reporting period go up. Then they drop (FG# 3).

Many of the agencies noted the disconnection between the work that they do and the tasks needed for fully implementing and reporting on their OMF. The services that community workers offer vary considerably

and are also changing constantly. This makes it difficult to establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that can be updated routinely.

Reporting on medium and long-term outcomes appeared particularly difficult for some of the interviewed agencies, particularly those working with transient clients. The OMFs ask agencies to report on the longer-term impacts of the programs that SMART funds, yet many of the agencies do not have on-going contacts with their clients.

Participants at the Focus Group also offered a broader perspective of the place that OMF plays in the political field in VCH. They appreciate SMART's strategy behind the implementation of the OMF because they realize that there is a threat of losing funding. Participants mainly associated this perceived threat of cuts with competing demands from acute care services at VCH. However, with this understanding of the need for and appreciation of the strategy there is also resentment. "The most under funded part of the sector has the greatest onus of accountability. I go to meetings with other people in other parts of various health authorities and when there are changes in management they all get new letterhead and business cards and the lack of accountability that their programs have is astonishing to me"(FG #2).

There is also a suspicion about how SMART has been "overly preoccupied with trying to justify itself and almost overly preoccupied in terms of trying to refine more and more and more the management framework in order to justify that health promotion means something. It's the absolute paranoia that any moment the big Buddha is going to come down and destroy the SMART Fund. It's really because the SMART Fund has been trying so hard to protect itself. You have to be the very best; you have to be better than the very best because after all you are health promotion and what the hell does that mean? So you've got to show them that you're even better so that's what we are doing. So in a way [the agencies] are all just kind of cogs in this machine and that's what we have to do in order to justify ourselves all with the best of intentions and all with really good people. I think [SMART's] fears and anxieties play down to us and so we are scurrying around just trying to make everything work to deal with their fears and anxieties. And of course they're our fears and anxieties too". (FG #2)

Focus group participants refer to what they perceive as an ambivalent message they receive where on the one hand VCH senior management attends showcases and commends them for the work they are doing and are moved by the stories they hear. On the other, they are told that they need to produce "harder" data to make the case for increased funding.

SMART staff recognize this tension as they are the ones who are asked to report on the Fund's impact based on a return on investments model.

I call it the “physics envy”. In the accountant's mind, if there's a number to it, it's better than if there's not a number to it. But it's got to be more than just the process numbers. What were some of the other outcomes that occurred? And if you can get some numerical values around those, and then even if you can take another step and show some of the resource implications of those outcomes, that's even better (II#4).

The challenge for SMART as for any community based health promotion initiatives funder is to track down the social and cultural changes that occur at the community level as a result of the funded interventions and represent them as they affect the regional impact.

IV. Conclusions

This report documents results of a novel collaborative research project that took as its focus the examination of participant perceptions related to the decision to institute outcome measurement reporting on SMART funded contracts. Key stakeholders were involved in selecting the research question, participating in interviews and focus groups, and examining and advising on emergent themes produced by the writers of this report.

This research report provides a candid representation of how key stakeholders (health regions, non profit agencies, academics) have come to make sense of the same series of events from different positions. What emerges is a calculated strategy used by the SMART Fund to mitigate the negative impact of producing what some decision-makers would consider “soft” evidence of positive change produced by health promotion initiatives in an environment characterized by competitions for limited public funds. In order to strengthen the value of results produced by the SMART contracts, a series of actions were undertaken: 1) Establishing a consistent requirement by agencies to produce and report on outcomes as well as ensuring these reported outcomes aligned with VCH's overall strategic plans. SMART achieved this through building trust, capacity and providing ongoing support to the contracted agencies; 2) Building SMART's overall visibility and credibility with VCH and externally through the use of partnerships with academia and other funding agencies. Combined, this strategy exposes an intricate web of relations that strengthen the value placed on the health promotion and capacity

building activities carried out through the SMART Fund. Alone, one element of this strategy may be weak in making this argument; however, when examined as a coherent whole it becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

While a majority of participants supported the work and strategy of the SMART Fund, others described an uneasy tension between the amounts of work to produce an OMF versus the overall benefit it provides to the community they support. Nevertheless, all participants shared a deep appreciation for VCH in relation to their commitment to pursue community capacity building efforts through a health promotion framework.

From the contracted agency participant standpoint, the SMART Fund has created a unique relationship that relies on both structural and individual dimensions. Stated principles about community based health promotion are consistent with the approach taken by the funder and by the daily exchanges between SMART Fund staff and the funded agencies. By developing and supporting strong relationships with the funded agencies and dedicating resources to develop community and organizational capacity, the SMART fund “walks the talk.” The outcomes approach to evaluation became one more aspect of the larger goals of developing capacity in the community .

V. Recommendations

Throughout the report we have included recommendations that informants offered as they discussed their views on the accountability strategy implemented by SMART. In this last section, we look back at some of them and add new suggestions based on the writers' analysis of the data.

For SMART

Recommendation #1: Aggregate OMF results across agencies:

Where clusters of capacity building focus across several agencies – such as where several groups are supporting seniors, support the groups in adopting consistent measures. This will allow for cross-agency evaluation of different strategies designed to address the same issue.

Recommendation #2: Provide access to an evaluation specialist

Support the agencies and the collection of information by assigning an evaluation specialist to work on an ongoing basis with each agency. This support can alleviate the work that the agencies are experiencing without taking the monitoring work off their hands so that organizational capacity is still taking place. Surveys that ask participants to state whether they feel that a workshop was useful, whether their skills or knowledge have increased are of limited value to decision-makers. The evaluation specialist can make the collection of data more consistent across agencies and thus facilitate the collation of results at the Fund level.

For Funding Organizations Considering Instituting an Accountability Strategy**Recommendation #3: Develop and Sustain Trust**

It is crucial for any funder who engages in an accountability strategy to include the funded projects as they move on the several steps towards a new evaluation structure. Strong relations can ensure buy-in for the new model, its goals and genuine commitment to the methods involved. The OMF as a tool on its own does not build relationships. An outcomes approach to evaluation will work best if embedded in a set of trusting relationships and commitment to shared goals.

Recommendation#4: Partnerships with Academia

Establish partnerships with academic units that have the capacity and resources to collect, analyse and report on data that funders and their funded organizations cannot take on.

For VCH**Recommendation #5: Engage public in discussions of health promotion**

Explore ways of engaging the general public in understanding health promotion as long term social and cultural initiatives. Political awareness and civic support can cultivate increased financial and in-kind contributions targeted towards health promotion activities that can in turn increase decision makers' perceptions of the value of and pressure to support these interventions.

For Funders Table

Recommendation #6: Streamline reporting requirement across funding bodies

Establish consistent reporting structures across funders.

Community based health promotion organizations are mainly interested in serving their clients. For them to dedicate the most resources to that task, additional tasks such as monitoring and reporting have to be meaningful and straightforward. When agencies have to report in different ways about different things to different funders, everyone loses because the energy spent in collecting data, analysing it and reporting on it is multiplied, taking time away from the clients. The efforts of SMART to bring together funders of community based health promotion and community capacity building programs has to be supported. Funders and the public all benefit when the agencies energies are dedicated to serving the clients well and having a streamlined method for reporting about this work.

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