

# *The Value of Participatory Food Costing*

## *Views of the Participants and Support People, Post Spring 2002 Food Costing*

**September 2005**

**Prepared by:  
Christine Johnson and Patricia Williams**

**On behalf of  
The Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre  
Nova Scotia Family Resource Centres/Projects (funded by the Canada  
Prenatal Nutrition Program & Community Action Program for  
Children)  
Nova Scotia Nutrition Council**

**Funding for this publication was provided by Health Canada. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors/researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official views of Health Canada.**



Nova Scotia Nutrition  
Council

**AHPRC**  
Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Health Canada for funding this project , and to the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre (AHPRC) for providing infrastructure and other in-kind supports for this project. Thanks as well to the Nova Scotia Nutrition Council and Nova Scotia Family Resource Centres/Projects (funded by the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program & Community Action Program for Children) for their commitment to and support of this project and to the many individuals who participated on the Steering Committee, National Advisory Committee and as support people and trainers to help guide this project. Thanks to Gillian Ellis and Karen LeBlanc for conducting the focus groups and interviews and to Becca Green for her helpful editing of the final report.

Deepest thanks to the many women who shared their experiences, passion and skills to make participatory food costing in Nova Scotia a first step in building food security in Nova Scotia.

## **Table of Contents**

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgements   | 2  |
| Introduction   | 4  |
| Development of Participatory Food Costing Training Methods | 4  |
| Project Evaluation Framework and Tools:                    | 5  |
| Examining Capacity Building                                |    |
| Why Focus on Capacity Building?                            | 6  |
| Methodology  | 7  |
| Results: What Participants had to say                      | 8  |
| A. Preparedness to conduct food costing                    | 9  |
| B. Challenges and facilitators                             | 9  |
| C. Elements of participatory approaches                    | 12 |
| D. Benefits of participation                               | 14 |
| ▪ <i>Learnings</i>   | 14 |
| ▪ <i>Applying learnings</i>                                | 15 |
| ▪ <i>Raised awareness</i>                                  | 15 |
| ▪ <i>Participation</i>                                     | 16 |
| ▪ <i>Leadership</i>  | 16 |
| ▪ <i>Linking</i>   | 16 |
| E. Continued interest                                      | 17 |
| F. Motivation for action                                   | 18 |
| G. Identifying root causes and solutions                   | 20 |
| H. Relationship to population health                       | 21 |
| Conclusion   | 21 |
| References   | 23 |

## Introduction

This report describes a formative evaluation that was completed following the Spring 2002 food costing conducted throughout Nova Scotia by the Nova Scotia Nutrition Council and Nova Scotia Family Resource Centres/Projects (funded by the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program & Community Action Program for Children). The intent of the evaluation was to capture the thoughts of Project participants, both costers and support people, around four main categories: participants perceived preparedness to conduct food costing; challenges and facilitators to conducting food costing; elements of participatory food costing approaches; and benefits of being involved in the project. The evaluation also sought to gage the level of interest and readiness in continued involvement in food security projects, including the planned Fall 2002 food costing. Specifically it sought to identify how participants and support people were motivated to use food costing data and advance food security issues, explore their ability to asses the root causes of nutritional and income inequalities, and examine their ability to view food security from a population health perspective.

## Development of Food Costing Training Methods

In order to effectively execute food costing using participatory approaches, a process for training Family Resource Centre/Projects (FRC/Ps) participants in conducting food costing was developed. The process was piloted once at a training workshop at Family Matters, a FRC/P in Annapolis Royal, NS. Following that, a meeting was held in Dayspring, NS with all Nova Scotia Participatory Food Security Project partners to discuss roles and expectations for the food costing project. One of the key recommendations was that a FRC/P staff person help deliver the food costing training to FRC/Ps participants training to be food costers, this would increase the comfort level of FRC/Ps participants and allow for greater connections and resources available to food costers in the local community throughout the project. Ten FRC/Ps representatives were trained to help facilitate the delivery of the training workshops in their areas. Workshops were subsequently provided in five central locations across the province – Port Hawkesbury, Digby, Sackville, Shelburne, and Truro. Food costing training workshop participants included FRC participants who would conduct the food costing as well as FRC/Ps staff, Public Health Nutritionists, and dietetic interns who wanted to be trained to act as supports for the food costers in their areas. Training consisted of a six hour long workshop that involved an introduction to the project, reflections on food security and policy, introduction to food costing methods, actual hands on food costing at a local grocery store, calculation of the cost of the food basket, and discussion of implications for food security and food security related policies.

## Project Evaluation Framework and Tools: Examining Capacity Building

The Food Costing Project team worked in collaboration with an evaluation consultant to develop a framework for program evaluation. The goal was to examine the extent to which the Project had reached its goal to enhance the capacity of participants to conduct food costing in their communities and to address issues of food insecurity.



*The specific questions guiding the overall evaluation were:*

- Did the Project use a participatory process with Project partners?
- Did the Project succeed in creating an opportunity for dialogue among FRC representatives, the NSNC, and decision-makers throughout the Project?
- Were partner knowledge and skills enhanced related to policy development for food security?
- Was a participatory model to monitor the cost of a healthy diet created?
- Were strategies to use the evidence collected through the food costing developed to strengthen policy for food security?

An evaluation process and tools were then developed based on this framework. The components of the evaluation and the tools used for each included: 1) a pre-training questionnaire examining what participants hoped to gain from the training and participation in the project; 2) guidelines for facilitating a reflective session during the training workshop which included questions to facilitate discussion on food security, policy, how participants felt they need to be supported to be involved in the project and to become active in policy work, how participants defined capacity, and what capacities participants were hoping to build upon; 3) a post-training workshop questionnaire to evaluate the workshop and measure any capacities built through the training such as an increased understanding of food security, policy, and food costing; 4) a focus group guide to facilitate discussion post food costing to examine the capacities built in terms of participants' skills and knowledge, the use of participatory approaches, and barriers and enablers to carrying out food costing; 5) an in-depth interview guide built on findings from the focus groups. In-depth-interviews were also held with participants of the Participatory Food Costing Project following the Fall food costing, a series of story sharing workshops, and a dissemination/celebration workshop held with project partners to share results and strategize action plans for using the evidence to influence policy towards completion of the participatory food costing project. This report is limited to the findings of the focus group and

individual interviews held post spring 2002 food costing; results of the other components of this study (Johnson, 2004) and the findings from the food costing and story sharing are reported elsewhere (Williams et al 2005; Nova Scotia Nutrition Council et al 2004).

### *Why Focus on Capacity Building?*

Capacity building involves the development of skills, organizational structures, resources, and commitment to health improvement in health and other sectors, and has been shown to result in multiple and prolonged health gains (Hawe et al, 1999). Devon Dodd & Boyd (2000) describe how capacity can be built at different levels including personal/individual, community, and system. Personal capacity is the ability to use personal resources to achieve goals which include such facets as attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Community capacity can be thought of as a community's ability to identify, mobilize, and address social and health issues. This capacity is linked to the community's ability to engage policy makers in dialogue and effectively influence change. Building capacity at the personal and community level is often aimed at influencing change at the systems level. Building system capacity is seen as the ability of an entire system to monitor and address public problems (Devon Dodd & Boyd, 2000).

Capacity building can be thought of as both a means and an end. Conceptualized as a means, capacity building can be viewed as a part of community development and empowerment processes and also as an approach to more efficient program delivery and sustainability. Not exclusive from its role as a means, capacity building is often a goal of health promotion programs, with strengthened individual and organizational capacities being proposed program outcomes (Labonte & Laverack, 2001; Restrepo, 2000; Hawe, Noort, King, & Jordens, 1997). Regardless if viewed as a means or an outcome, when social and health programs involve capacity building, there is the potential to increase the community's ability to address not only the current issue of focus by the program, but other issues affecting the community as well. Strengthened capacities among program participants can be considered an investment in long-term success of both the program and the participants' ability to invest in the program and community (Hawe, Noort, King, & Jordens, 1997).

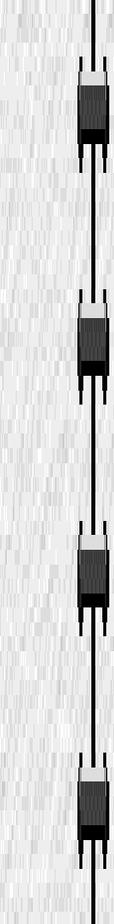
Capacity building efforts often aim to empower the disempowered by facilitating dialogue on the issue affecting them and by providing a supportive environment within which positive social change can occur. Social and economic inclusion is necessary to create processes where capacity can be built amongst those with limited power and voice. Social and economic inclusion requires equal partnerships and collaborations as well as involvement of all who are affected by the issue in program development and delivery (Devon Dodd & Boyd, 2000). For instance, when the issue affecting a community is food insecurity, food security will only ever be fully achieved

when the concerns and capacities of people experiencing hunger and worries around where their next meal will come from or the safety or acceptability of the food supply, are considered. With these concerns properly heard and respected, appropriate actions can be identified to influence the development of economic and social policies promoting food security (CHEA, 1999).

It is recognized that capacity building is needed at all levels to ‘bridge the gap’ between communities and public policy, with healthy public policy often being an outcome of strengthened capacities (Devon Dodd & Boyd, 2000; Restrepo, 2000). When key community stakeholders, including those facing social exclusion, partner to identify and implement solutions for issues affecting them, capacity is built and health gains prolonged and multiplied (Hawe, Noort, King, & Jordens, 1997; Travers 1996; 1997a and b).

### Methodology

A series of five focus groups were held throughout Nova Scotia with individuals involved in FRC/Ps and who had been involved in the Participatory Food Costing Project as food costers in the Spring of 2002. Interviews were conducted with five individuals who were trained and acted as supports in communities for the food costing. The focus groups and interviews took place following at least one food costing event. Focus groups were conducted in Amherst, Bridgewater, Dartmouth, Digby, and Port Hawkesbury, the same general five areas where food costing training workshops had been held. FRC/Ps provided space for focus groups.



The purpose of the focus groups and interviews was to assess knowledge and skills developed through being involved with the participatory food costing project including:

- the change in knowledge, experience, and skills related to food security and food costing;
- the application of knowledge, experience, and skills which have been gained;
- the benefits and challenges of participation in the Project.

In addition, the focus groups and interviews aimed to explore the use of participatory approaches and the process of partnership development including:

- FRC/P participants' and trainers'/support persons' input/perspective into participatory processes used (e.g. participatory decision making, shared vision, role consensus, participatory communication, etc.)
- FRC/P participants' and trainers'/support persons' input/perspective into partnership development (e.g. opportunities

### Results: What Participants Had to Say

Results of the focus groups and interviews provided many insights into the experience of being involved with the Participatory Food Costing Project from the perspective of individuals who participated as food costers and trainers/support people. Participants commented on *preparedness* to do food costing, *the challenges and facilitators* that arose during involvement, and the *elements of participatory approaches* used in the Project. Participants highlighted a number of *benefits* associated with being involved with the Project that are indicative of capacities built including learnings, application of learnings, raised awareness, participation, leadership, and linking. Participants expressed *interest in continuing* with this Project in particular as well as a *motivation to act* to use the evidence gathered for change. In addition, responses indicated a grasp of high level capacities such as *identifying root causes* to the issue of food insecurity, *identifying solutions* to the root causes, and seeing the relationship between *food security and overall population health*. Participants also gave practical suggestions throughout for the Project in terms of what needs to happen in order for them to be able to use the evidence and initiate change in their personal lives and communities.

Quotes from focus groups and interviews are shown in italics. FG, which stands for focus groups, and I, which stands for interviews, are listed and numbered to let the reader know which situation the quote arose from.

### **A) Preparedness to Conduct Food Costing**

Focus group participants were asked if they felt prepared to conduct food costing in grocery stores in their community. In response to this, they commented on the value of the practical hands-on learning of completing food costing in a store as part of the training. Most appreciated this approach to learning and felt it helped them to do the calculations required. There was only one comment indicating the training provided a lot of information and was overwhelming. As per project protocol, FRC/Ps participants carried out the food costing in pairs so that they could help each other. In addition, staff from FRC/Ps were also trained as supports to help participants with the food costing and provide a link to Project staff in order to help make the process as easy as possible for the food costers. During the interviews, support people reported they felt the training adequately prepared food costers for conducting food costing. They reported that the hands on training at the grocery store was especially useful.

*And I think the hands on part... the being able to go out to the store and actually do the food costing with trainers there to kind of over see it. That was very helpful. (FG4)*

*We really didn't have any questions when we went. No, when we went to the grocery store we were shown exactly what we were to do. (FG5)*

*I found it overwhelming a bit when you did the training and went to the grocery store. Like I just had so much information, but it felt like my brain was on overload type thing. There was a lot to remember. (FG1)*

### **B) Challenges and Facilitators**

As with any project attempting to involve participatory approaches, there are both challenges that present and facilitators that help overcome these challenges. Focus group and interview participants outlined some of the challenges and facilitators presented within the Participatory Food Costing Project.

#### *Challenges*

Even though expenses related to transportation for the training and the food costing were covered by the project, having access to a reliable vehicle and meetings/workshops being a long distance for particular groups to travel, were

still identified as barriers to participation. Arranging for child care was also identified as a challenge albeit funds were provided by the Project to participants to cover expenses related to this.

*But sometimes transportation, childcare, those are still barriers and I don't know what the answer is to that. (FG4)*

Time was also reported to be another barrier to participation. Most participants were parents and many were attending school or had jobs and needed to time manage between food costing and other commitments. Part of project protocol required that all food costing take place within one week's time, for some participants this meant up to four or five stores they needed to survey within a short period of time.

*Well you guys are both in school so...yeah... this time it's just that they have to do it on Saturday. (FG4)*

Challenges associated with the actual processes of the Project, such as training and data collection, were also raised.

During training and data collection some participants found the math and some of the language involved to be challenging.

*Talked a bit much about capacity building [during the training] and it gets lost on some people. (I2)*

Participants reported that some grocery stores where food costing took place did not have all items on the food costing survey available, making it difficult for them to complete the survey. In some stores there were no scales to weigh produce items that were priced per head or per bunch. An additional process challenge identified was participants reported that walking around the stores wearing badges, with a clipboard and pen brought about extra and sometimes negative attention from other customers.

*I think our biggest challenge was when we went to a smaller grocery store so there wasn't a great variety in prices. (FG1)*

*They (store) no longer have a weight scale. (FG5)*

*It was sometimes people that would give you the dirty looks. (FG 1)*

Participants also stated that explaining what they were doing to others was often challenging. They recognized the resource sheets that were distributed as being too high language, making the overall purpose of food costing difficult to understand and explain to others.

*And I found the little things they had put in the packages kind of helpful. Like, the food basket what it is and why we're doing it but it wasn't clear enough. Like it wasn't concise enough to actually follow it and say okay this is it so people know. (FG1)*

One support person described how involving people at the ground level was challenging and how the day-to-day barriers can be so great for some people that they may be unable to look past them. It was felt that it is especially difficult to engage people in looking towards the long-term when they are currently dealing with food insecurity.

#### *Facilitators*

Facilitators of the food costing process which made it easier to participate and helped overcome some of the challenges presented were also identified by focus group and interview participants. The reimbursement of transportation and childcare costs was seen as a key facilitator to participation.

*And the fact that they had transportation available made it really nice too. It would have been hard for me to provide that. (FG4)*

*With a paid babysitter... you got a paid babysitter. Even being able to be reimbursed for travel helped a lot. Because it just reduces the stress when you're on a very tight income. (FG4)*

The methods used during training were seen to be in line with adult education approaches and several people commented that the resource sheets provided were especially helpful when collecting data.

*And I think in the classroom you're taught by rote example. Like you just memorize and this way you're taught practical application. I think it makes it easier to learn if you can see a purpose to it. (FG4)*

*The forms were nice and easy to follow. They were very clear. (FG 5)*

*The trouble shooting sheet and um the conversion sheet was a blessing in disguise. (FG1)*

Having trained FRC/Ps staff, Public Health Nutritionists and dietetic interns available as support people in the local area for the food costers was viewed as a facilitator.

*What I found useful was knowing that at any time I had questions I knew who to contact and how to contact them, and I knew that my questions would be answered quickly. (FG4)*

The receptiveness and willingness of the stores to participate was also seen as a facilitator to the overall success of the Project and to the food costers' comfort in conducting the food costing.

*The stores were happy to have us there. (FG5)*

*I think it's good though that the stores know that we're out there. And I thought it was very good of those stores to allow us in there, knowing that we'd probably be going to other stores and be seeing the difference. (FG5)*

### **C) Elements of Participatory Approaches**

To ensure the Project was following its participatory philosophy, we wanted to know what elements of participatory approaches were being used and valued by the food costers and support people. Respondents identified many elements of the partnership between NSNC and FRC/Ps as consistent with participatory approaches. The involvement of individuals who have experienced food insecurity, either directly or indirectly, was mentioned as a way to give power to those affected by the issue to properly address it. Respondents recognized a collaborative relationship existed between the NSNC and the FRC/Ps and this participatory relationship was seen as bringing diverse and complimentary credibility to addressing the issue of food insecurity. They felt that the Project and NSNC were able to provide the credibility needed to support the research and have results respected by policy makers and the general public, and that their involvement ensured practical solutions via program and policies were being moved forward.

*... So, it gives you a really strong tool to do advocacy and it give you also credibility because if it's just a family resource centre that will do it, they will say oh they don't know what they're talking about. But, coming from the Nova Scotia Nutrition Council it's been done by the nutritionists. People know what they are talking about and that instantly gives that... umm... credibility and respect. Right... But, also ... I think what they're trying to get at here is that it's not just the Nova Scotia Nutrition Council saying okay we're going to do something now. And, have all kinds of people who have PhD's and this, that, and the other. It's actually people who live on family benefits or lower incomes and things like that, that are involved in... you know... The one's who have the four kids, you know, that are the four member family. Umm... that have x number of dollars to buy groceries with. And I mean that's more credible because these people are living... You know, like I'm living. Right. I know I have x number of dollars coming in each month. And, you know, some has to go here, some has to go there, and I still have to feed my family. And I think that... If I, as a parent, go and say to my MP well, you know, this is*

*what I have for groceries and this is what the Nova Scotia Nutrition Council says I should be spending on groceries. Now, what are you going to do to help me? (FG1)*

*I think it was a good idea to ... ask family resource centres to be involved... cause ... that would target people who really need it and who needs this information. And, hopefully make change for those people. (FG5)*

Participants identified elements of how the Project was managed using participatory approaches. In particular, the flexibility exhibited in running the Project and the approach taken when facilitating the training workshops were highlighted. The following quote refers to how once the sample of stores randomly selected throughout the province to be included in the food costing survey was finalized, Project staff recognized FRC/Ps participants' interest in costing stores in their area that weren't included in the sample. Food costers were still supported to survey these stores although survey data for these stores were not included in the data analysis of the research project.

*We had a lot of flexibility in that cause we even suggested stores. Like, we saved an e-mail saying if you have any other stores in your community that you thought would be of interest to your participants (FG3)*

A train-the-trainer approach was used to deliver the training. Staff and participants from FRC/Ps were trained and then helped deliver the food costing training to participants in their communities. The training workshops were held in five areas throughout the province in order to try and reach as many food costers as possible and lessen the barrier of distance and travel. These approaches were clearly appreciated by the food costers and support people interviewed with them noting their comfort in participating at these events.

*But I know when it came to the... coming into the communities. I think they [NSNC] did quite well with reaching as many communities as they could. (FG4)*

*I did find one thing that was very effective was the people that did the training were... I'll use the term "real people" that are participants who identify with like... They didn't come across as experts and we're gonna tell you how to do this and... Because a lot of times that throws our participants off really bad. ...And that's one thing... Like they brought their own personal experiences into it and that was a really good thing. (FG4)*

An underlying principle of participatory approaches is drawing and building upon existing strengths. Respondents were able to identify strengths held by

FRC/Ps participants such as awareness of the problem of food insecurity and experience in identifying the lowest cost items. Food Costers also identified that their strengths were built upon through their involvement in the Project. They viewed that food costing was a tool that they could use to further raise awareness of the challenges of healthy eating for those on low incomes. As well, they reported that their math skills were built upon and how this training and experience was useful for their personal grocery shopping.

*I think there's no better way to be participatory than to use mothers at the centres who do the shopping... Do you know what I mean? We know what we're looking for and we already have handling how to get the groceries at the best price. (FG5)*

*I think that it gives us a tool to really affect maybe the politician where we can ask the very precise question. It's a also diverse tool as a family resource centre to do advocacy for parents. Uh... It gives me a tool even when I go and talk to church groups. And I have people say well people on social assistance don't know how to get groceries. So, when I come... they are not buying the right food. Or they are not healthy. Well, if I said, well, listen they have a cheque of \$700 or \$800, and really no money... They should spend \$500 just for the basic food. (FG1)*

#### **D) Benefits of Participation**

Participants identified several benefits from being involved with the Participatory Food Costing Project that reflect capacity building at the individual level. These benefits can be grouped into six categories: learnings gained; the ability to apply learnings; awareness raised; the ability to participate; the development of leadership skills; and the opportunity to link and establish relationships with others.

##### *Learnings*

Many of the learnings reported were related to direct knowledge and skill development as a result of participating in food costing training. Focus group participants responded that they gained knowledge in terms of doing math, calculations, and unit pricing for cost comparisons.

*Math for me, the math and weighing out the vegetables and stuff like that. (FG1)*

*Learning how to convert... amounts to... like a package amount to a unit amount. I find that easier to do now since I've gone through the food costing. I've always known that it's a good thing to do that, but that really gave a hands on why it's a good thing to do that. (FG4)*

Another learning reported related to developing communication skills and the ability to work with others.

*People that aren't used to working together with other people - it's a new experience that way. And I think it was a learning experience for them through that. (FG4)*

#### *Applying Learnings*

Focus group participants felt that they were able to apply the learnings gained through their involvement in food costing. They reported applying the skills developed to their own situations, such as when grocery shopping. Participants also reported that they applied the learnings by transferring and sharing their knowledge with others, such as those facing similar issues with food insecurity.

*The learning to comparison shop and breakdown prices, and being able to apply that for our own grocery shopping purposes. The sale price is not always the cheapest. (FG4)*

*I found that a couple of times... passing some of the information onto other people that...I mean only had so much money to buy groceries with. That's helped me. (FG1)*

*Like especially now my kids are getting older and you can actually show them... You know, this tomato soup... This is Campbell's tomato soup that you see on TV that's glorified, but this is the same soup. (FG2)*

#### *Raised Awareness*

Participants also reported that their participation in the Project raised their awareness of the issue of food security, the impact it has on people, and how it can be addressed. Awareness was also raised in terms of the usefulness of food costing studies and examining the cost of purchasing a healthy diet, as well as the actual results of the food costing.

*I didn't even know there was organizations working to address food security. When you think of food security, you think of third world countries. You don't think of countries like Canada is in trouble. But after this you realize there are (FG3)*

*Yeah, the different impacts that this has on people and... Umm... Some people... I mean, financially... It's a different way of life than... I guess your finances basically determines how you live. I mean, for me, it wasn't a problem, but... to see how other people... it was big eye opener. I think with me too the training was a big part of it. Just awareness that I didn't have before. I mean I knew there was the problem, but I didn't know*

*the degree or how it could be measured, or... things like that...  
(FG4)*

*I was amazed by the price that it cost for a family of four to eat  
healthy (FG1)*

### *Participation*

Participation itself was viewed as a benefit gained by many participants. Participation in the Project was beneficial to individuals in terms of feeling a sense of belonging and contribution as well as becoming more actively involved in the community. Participation in food costing was also thought to be a springboard for participation in higher levels of the Project such as policy work. One interview respondent reported that FRC/Ps participants had also become involved in speaking to their local MP since they had participated as food costers.

*What was good for me was just being part of it. And um being able to talk to  
other people about it certainly helps (FG1)*

*I think probably through being able to get our participants involved in  
this at this level. I think it will make it easier for them to want to be  
involved in the policy level too... with the training and direction.  
(FG4)*

*Up until that she never really gotten involved with community... being  
a part of her community other than being a resident in her community.  
Umm... I think it's had an impact on probably her and people around  
her because of the changes it's brought for herself. Just a change in,  
umm, the way she looks at things. And she's more outgoing now. It  
just gives them more self-esteem and power then to do these things.  
(FG4)*

### *Leadership*

Participants spoke of witnessing the development of leaders within their small groups who were central to organizing the actual food costing and who often became the contact person for the Project on behalf of a group. The development of leadership skills is also an indicator of capacity building. Leadership is an essential component of participation and it is an aim of capacity building programs to foster leadership amongst participants so as to aid in transferring program responsibility.

*I like how [participant] kind of took charge of everything. That was  
really nice to have someone to call about. Do you know what's going  
on? (FG3)*

### *Linking*

The theme of linking arose as another benefit to participation. Respondents spoke of the links that occurred between individuals stating that new

friendships were developed. In addition, linking between organizations was mentioned such as between different FRC/Ps, between the NSNC and FRC/Ps, between FRC/Ps and other community groups, as well as between the FRC/Ps and grocery stores.

*And it wasn't just our usual... It wasn't just our usual little click. You know, click of people with same Mom's that always do it. There was different people from different groups. You became a team. (FG3)*

*Met new people. And now we're like phoning each other. E-mail everyday. (FG3)*

*Uh... Well, you know, I guess when you're going into doing the food costing and you say okay we're in here to do food costing. Identify yourself as this person who is from a family resource centre..., you know, that kind of forms a relationship like at least they're aware of that organization in town, and why you're doing it. (FG1)*

*On a professional level, now I know who the Nova Scotia Nutrition Council is and some of the faces on that council... (FG4)*

The strength of existing links that FRC/Ps have was seen as a benefit to the success of the project.

*And, also Family Resource Centres have more ties to social groups as well that they would be able to, umm, connect with other agencies to make change. We already have those connections. (FG5)*

Support people, through interviews, spoke of benefits exclusive to FRC/Ps as an organization. This included having greater knowledge and ability to address the issue of poverty by affecting policies in their communities. It was agreed that organizational capacity was built within the FRC/Ps via the Project.

### **E) Continued Interest**

Participants were very interested in continuing their involvement with the Project, particularly to conduct a second round of food costing, as well as to be involved in other aspects of the Project. Participants were especially interested in seeing the results of the food costing survey and potential long-term results of the Project such as upstream policy changes. Responses were indicative of a desire to sustain food costing efforts.

*More food costing. And knowing the result (FG1)*

*And what I would like to see to is that we do the food costing maybe on a regular basis. (FG1)*

*I would like to participate in another way if I could (FG3)*

*Is it gonna be done again or is it gonna be done again in ten more years? (FG3)*

## **F) Motivation for Action**

In addition to interest in continuing to be involved in addressing food security through food costing, responses indicated that Project participants were motivated to act and use the results to make change. This is particularly encouraging as an overall goal of the Project is to build food security through influencing policy. The motivation for action appeared on two levels. Some participants were interested in being involved in provincial efforts while others felt that advocating locally was the level that they would be a best fit for. Participants expressed interest in using the evidence gathered from food costing for advocacy efforts in order to influence various policies. Some of the avenues mentioned included advocating to politicians, such as MLAs and MPs, as well as advocating to grocery stores and agencies such as social services and income assistance programs.

*I think that lobbying for the community services would probably hit hardest. Umm, in respect to ah... To see if they could give an increase in food allowance maybe or something. And even for the old age pensioners too. You have to think that they are the same.... (FG1)*

*What about the food stores themselves? I mean I know obviously they're wealthy and they're powerful. I wonder if there's any room for lobbying... You know, the [name of grocery store] who are billionaires. And you know what I mean? I wonder if there's any room... (FG2)*

Participants expressed interest in knowing what the overall Project's strategy was for using the data to influence policy. They also felt that any actions taken to use the evidence should be based on coordinated efforts of many throughout the province.

*I'd like to know what their strategy is on it. What their strategy would be in regards to how they would approach it. (FG1)*

*I know myself I want to know where they're going to go with it. Exactly. And, you know, how I can take it and apply that to*

*help develop some policies in my area, especially related to the food bank. Yep. This is me as a participant speaking. (FG1)*

*I think they have to help us make a plan of action...An action plan where we all work together...So, we can do something with all this information. (FG1)*

*Because we can't have everybody having the data just within their community and taking it, and going with it, because then you're all scattered all over the map and no body knows what the other person is doing. (FG2)*

*If you have everybody working together and you have everybody doing the same all across the province then your voice is gonna be heard. (FG2)*

Respondents also mentioned the importance of using the evidence as a tool for raising awareness since they feel that the issue of food insecurity is misunderstood. Participants wanted to raise the awareness of various groups including other members of their FRC/Ps, municipalities and towns, and food banks and also the general public.

*You know, through municipalities or towns or whatever...  
...And food banks and so forth. And even though they might not have the power to give funds, you know, to make these figures, you know, available so that... like... I think you were talking about the food bank.... We were chatting about... Just indignity the way some people are treated and so forth that might be a wake up call for people who are associated with these organizations instead of saying stupid things to people. They might realize, you know, oh my gosh, this is unreal. So, you use it within our communities as and education tool on... for our food banks and our municipal leaders and so forth. (FG2)*

Specific activities proposed for using the evidence include publishing results in the media, press conferences, and staging an event with a shopping cart of foods included in the National Nutritious Food Basket as a visual of how much healthy eating can cost.

Publish reports in a newspaper/on the web (FG2)

A news conference. Voting time sometimes seems to work well. (FG3)

And even in terms of, umm, your local MLA. You know, when your study comes out bring it to your MLA. And talking

to him or her and saying, you know, we're really concerned about this. (FG2)

Participants were interested in receiving help and resources for becoming involved in policy and saw this as a role for the NSNC.

*Tell us how we can go about changing policy in their [Community Services for Income Assistance] office. Who would we contact that we have to change the policy that we can get more groceries... (FG5)*

*Before this training I had taken a workshop on public policy. And those two workshops just went like this. They just tied into together so well... And... umm... It would be really nice to be able to use this information and put it together with the public policy information and really get things moving like... challenging some of the policies that exist now. Yeah...at the resource level (FG4)*

The outlook of potential for policy change was very positive amongst the groups.

*But I think probably not nearly as many people as will benefit if this project seen through to completion the way I think it is envisioned now with the policy work and that... I think if we can see it through it's gonna have a big impact on a lot of people. (FG4)*

### **G) Identifying Root Causes and Solutions**

Participants demonstrated an ability to critically assess the root causes of nutritional and income inequalities which is a step crucial to the development of effective strategies for action and change. Participants identified various causes of food insecurity; such as issues faced by those living in rural areas, housing issues, as well as issues with the social welfare system.

*I personally feel that everyone is affected by it. Like... in every social economical part of society. We're all affected by it. Like... yeah, low income and single parents, and things like that, might get hit more, but in reality they're not. Same here. Like ourselves. It's something... Tight requirements. Disability... Yep... That's the kind of endorsement that hits you in the face. ...Transportation. (FG3)*

*They [social services] give you just enough rope to hang yourself (FG1)*

## **H) Relationship to Population Health**

Being able to extrapolate the relationship between food insecurity and health is a complex process. Participants of focus groups were able to go beyond their personal health directly and speak of the relationship between food insecurity and the overall health of the population in that they recognize the broad range of benefits of reducing health and social inequities to all of society .

*Like, food is a necessity. It's not... It's not a gift or it's not... You have to have it. It's a right. ...And I think if that if family eats better they will be less sick. Exactly. So, we will take that off... The healthcare. ..Yeah, the healthcare. (FG1)*

## Conclusion

Overall, these findings show that being involved in the Participatory Food Costing Project was valuable to participants and to the support people who were trained in participatory food costing methods. It was felt that the training workshops provided were able to meet the needs of food costers and adequately prepared them to conduct food costing. When challenges around doing food costing, such as math and calculations, presented, the project staff and support people (FRC/Ps staff, Public Health Nutritionists, and dietetic interns) provided the necessary assistance to overcome these challenges.

In addition to evaluating the food costers' experience in successfully completing the food costing, this exploration sought to examine if the participatory process was a successful method for building capacities to conduct food costing and address the issue of food insecurity. Participants were able to clearly articulate the meaning of participatory approaches and comment on their value. In terms of capacity building specifically, there were several themes that arose from the results that indicate the capacities that were built among food costers and those who participated as support people. The learnings gained and the participants' subsequent ability to apply these new learnings to other situations is a clear indicator of knowledge and skills built. In addition, it also shows the value of building capacity in providing benefits beyond one single project. Awareness was raised amongst those involved in terms of better understanding food insecurity and how to address it. Participation alone, just being involved in something that aims to creating real and long lasting change, was seen as a benefit for many. There was clear evidence of leadership skills that were built and used at the ground level. One final benefit noted was the linking and networking that was occurring as a result of partnerships formed during the Project.

Many of the respondents spoke of great interest in continuing their involvement with the Project and in working on the issue of building food

security. They spoke to the potential to act using the results gathered, in particular, there was a focus on using the results to influence policy that affects food security. Other indicators of capacities built included respondent's abilities to identify root causes of poverty and food insecurity, a crucial step to identifying long-term solutions, as well as their ability to link the issue to overall population health in seeing that reductions in inequities would provide benefit to the entire population.

While there were different factors associated with participating in the food costing project, some factors acting as barriers, some acting as facilitators, overall the Project participants felt well prepared and are eager to continue their involvement. The positive feedback provided in this evaluation piece around capacities built for food costing and addressing food security, provide an optimistic view towards success of continued partnership and work by the Nova Scotia Nutrition Council, Family Resource Centres/Projects and other groups with a common goal to advance food security in their communities.

## References

Canadian Home Economics Association. (1999) Position paper of the Canadian Home Economics Association on food security. *Canadian Home Economics Journal*, 49(1), 5-9.

Devon Dodd, J. & Hebert Boyd, M. (2000) *Capacity Building: Linking Community Experience to Public Policy*. Population and Public Health Branch Atlantic, Health Canada.

Hawe, P., King, L., Noort, M., Jordens, C., & Lloyd, B. (1999) Indicators to help with capacity building in health promotion. NSW Health Department: North Sydney NSW.

Hawe, P., Noort, M., King, L., & Jordens, C. (1997) Multiplying health gains: The critical role of capacity-building within health promotion programs. *Health Policy*, 39: 29-42.

Labonte, R. & Laverack, G. (2001) Capacity building in health promotion, Part 1: for whom? And for what purpose? *Critical Public Health*, 11(2), 111-127.

Nova Scotia Nutrition Council, Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre, Nova Scotia Community Action Program for Children and Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program Family Resource Centres. 2004. *Building food security in Nova Scotia: Using a participatory process to collect evidence and enhance the capacity of community groups to influence policy (Participatory Food Security Projects: Phase I and II)*.

Restrepo, H. (2000) *Increasing Community Capacity and Empowering Communities for Promoting Health*. Draft Technical Report. Fifth Global Conference on Health Promotion.

Travers, K. (1996) The social organization of nutrition inequities. *Social Science & Medicine*, 43(4): 543-553.

Travers, K. (1997a) Reducing inequities through participatory research and community empowerment. *Health Education & Behaviour*, 24(3), 344-356.

Travers, K. (1997b) Nutrition education for social change: Critical perspective. *Journal of Nutrition Education*, 29(2): 57-62.

Williams PL, Johnson C, Kratzmann M, Johnson CJ & Chenhall C. The Affordability of Eating Nutritiously in Nova Scotia: How do households earning minimum wage fare? *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, Submitted Jul., 2005.