



**UNIVERSITY
OF WARWICK**

Participatory Approaches to Monitoring and Evaluation: Learning and Accountability Through Inclusion



WICID

**WARWICK INTERDISCIPLINARY
RESEARCH CENTRE FOR
INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Primer in Brief

Participatory MEL: What You Need to Know¹

Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) is increasingly expected to support partnership, inclusion, and accountability to affected communities. This primer is written for MEL practitioners including advisors, evaluators, and commissioners who want to strengthen participation in their work while recognising real institutional constraints.

Participatory MEL does not necessarily require replacing existing frameworks, indicators, or reporting requirements. It involves making deliberate and transparent choices about where and how people affected by policies and programmes can shape evaluation processes and findings.

Key Takeaways

1. Participation is not all or nothing

Meaningful participation can be introduced at different stages of the MEL cycle, even in more restrictive settings when indicators, timelines, or budgets are fixed.

2. Where participation happens matters

Meaningful participation by involving communities in interpretation, sense-making, and the development of recommendations often has greater impact than limiting communities to the role of respondents providing data.

3. Participation increases rigour

By acknowledging multiple voices and perspectives as well as unavoidable subjectivity, participation of communities increases the rigour of MEL findings.

4. Credible participation is visible and documented

Participatory MEL strengthens accountability when it is clear who was involved, how their input influenced the evaluation, and what constraints shaped the process.

This primer is intended as a practical reference for evaluators² working within diverse institutional contexts who are looking for ways to make their work more participatory and inclusive. It supports reflection on the quality and credibility of participation within MEL,

¹ Authors: Raymond Hyma (University of Warwick and Monash University) and Briony Jones (University of Warwick) with the support of Research Assistant Chavi Ilwadhi and expert input from Marina Apgar (Institute of Development Studies). The views expressed in this primer are those of the individual authors and do not represent the views of any organisations cited.

² Including diverse forms of evaluation ranging from internal to externally commissioned and from accountability and learning to formative, or impact focused.

highlights common risks such as tokenism, and offers ways to strengthen learning and accountability within existing systems.

Participatory Approaches to Monitoring and Evaluation: Learning and Accountability Through Inclusion

This primer has been prepared by the Warwick Interdisciplinary Research Centre for International Development, in collaboration with the members of an expert network established at the event ‘Partnership and Participation – Policy in Partnership with Conflict and Peace Affected Communities’ which took place at the University of Warwick on 14 July 2025. This group of experts found that participation in monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) is key for:

- **Policy which is inclusive** of human stories and lived experiences which risk being marginalised by a focus on large datasets.
- **Policy which is evidence-based** with the incorporation of data and knowledge from affected communities themselves, strengthening triangulation and better able to capture complexity and learning.
- **Policy which is in partnership** with affected communities and their governments.

Recognising the challenging and diverse institutional contexts in which FCDO MEL advisors and commissioners undertake their work, this primer focuses on supporting realistic decision-making for participatory approaches which can be implemented while respecting both the challenging contexts of MEL work and key principles of participation.

This is more important than ever. The UK Government and FCDO recognise that working in partnership with ODA receiving countries and communities is vital for greater accountability as well as more effective international development efforts in the fields of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. This partnership principle is more pressing than ever, as we experience a reshaping of the development funding landscape. Including communities in the research which affects their lives is a significant acknowledgement of the UK Government’s commitment to working in partnership³ and signals an openness to perspectives of, and challenges from, civil society organisations and others.

³Chapman, J., The Rt Hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington. (2025) ‘Four Shifts’, in Wood, I. and Coolin, G. (eds.) Promising Development: New Approaches to UK International Development. Fabian Ideas 670. London: Fabian Society.

There is a significant amount of knowledge which can be shared from civil society and academia in support of these commitments. This primer collates this knowledge and introduces key principles, tools, and lessons for applying participatory approaches to MEL in policy and practice contexts. It synthesises insights from theory and field experience to support decision-makers and practitioners seeking to strengthen inclusion and learning in their evaluation systems. It highlights the ethical and methodological foundations of participatory MEL, reviews practical approaches and tools, and offers reflections on challenges, emerging trends, and opportunities for institutional change.

Contents

Primer in Brief	2
Participatory MEL: What You Need to Know	2
Key takeaways	2
Participatory Approaches to Monitoring and Evaluation: Learning and Accountability Through Inclusion	3
Introduction and Guiding Questions	6
Understanding Participation in MEL	9
Working in a traditional MEL system, still wanting participation?	12
Introducing participation across the evaluation process	12
Three practical checks to consider the potential of tokenism in participation.....	13
Principles of Participatory MEL	14
Co-creation/shared ownership	14
Inclusion.....	14
Transparency and flexibility.....	14
Continued learning.....	14
Approaches, Tools and Frameworks	16
Outcome Mapping	16
Most Significant Change	17
Outcome Harvesting	17
Participatory Video	17
Everyday Peace Indicators	18
Participatory Impact Pathways Analysis	18
Facilitative Listening Design.....	18
Community Score Card	19
Practical Guidance.....	20
Lighter-touch participation (low-resource, restrictive contexts)	20
Moderate participation (mid-range organisational flexibility)	21
Deep participation	23
Core Considerations for Participatory MEL	25
Further Resources.....	26
References	27

Introduction and Guiding Questions

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) remains central to effective policy and programming. It gathers evidence for decision-making, ensures accountability for results and impact, and supports ongoing learning.

As international development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding priorities shift towards localisation and inclusion, questions have emerged about who defines success, whose perspectives are heard, and how learning actually takes place.⁴ Traditional MEL approaches have often been designed for upward accountability to funders and external audiences, tending to privilege external technical expertise over local knowledge, and quantitative indicators over lived experience.⁵ While such systems can demonstrate efficiency and compliance, they frequently miss the deeper processes of change that matter most to the people directly affected by programming interventions,⁶ and in worst case scenarios, can ironically reproduce the very inequalities they seek to address.⁷ They also falsely assume that external ‘experts’ hold objective and transferable knowledge in ways which marginalise expertise to be found in conflict and peace affected communities.⁸

⁴ ‘SDG Localization’, UNDP, accessed 10 November 2025, <https://www.undp.org/governance/sdg-localization>.

⁵ Eliza Urwin et al., ‘Flipping the Power Dynamics in Measurement and Evaluation: International Aid and the Potential for a Grounded Accountability Model’, *Negotiation Journal* 39, no. 4 (2023): 401–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nej.12448>. See also Primer 2, ‘Common dilemmas and trade-offs’, which examines this tension in partnership terms, noting that ‘international organisations are often accountable upwards to funders, governments, and reporting requirements while local partners are commonly accountable downwards, to communities and the realities on the ground.’

⁶ Sara L. M. Davis et al., ‘Monitoring Interventions to Respond to Sexual Violence in Humanitarian Contexts’, *Global Health Governance* XII, no. 1 (2018), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3275329>.

⁷ Rebecca Warne Peters, ‘Participation Denied: The Professional Boundaries of Monitoring and Evaluation in International Development’, *Human Organization* 75, no. 4 (2016): 315–25, <https://doi.org/10.17730/1938-3525-75.4.315>.

⁸ For a further discussion of this see *Adapting the OECD Criteria for the Evaluation of Humanitarian Action* available at: <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/evaluation-criteria-guide-e-report/>. See also Primer 3, Contribution 3: GLOW - Learning from Pakistan, where local researchers are described as understanding ‘language, silence, hesitation, humour, coded expressions, hierarchy, and local risk’ in ways external evaluators often cannot.

Participatory approaches to MEL respond to these limitations and ethical risks by re-centring the role of peace and conflict affected stakeholders and communities in shaping, generating, and interpreting evidence. Rather than treating participation as an add-on, these approaches most commonly see it as foundational to both learning and accountability. They position MEL as collective inquiry processes and opportunities to make sense of change together, negotiate meanings of success, and strengthen trust between institutions and communities. In doing so, participatory MEL aims not only to measure results but also to enable reflection, adaptation, and empowerment within the systems that produce them.⁹

Interest in participatory approaches has grown alongside broader movements in scholarship, or a ‘participatory turn’ towards democratising research,¹⁰ decolonising knowledge¹¹, and epistemic injustice¹². Donors and implementing agencies increasingly recognise that meaningful participation enhances legitimacy, fosters shared ownership of outcomes, and contributes to more sustainable impacts¹³. Translating participatory principles into practice, however, remains challenging. Practitioners must navigate power dynamics, institutional constraints, and the tension between learning and accountability.

In the following sections, this primer synthesises insights, introduces key tools, and signposts further resources to support MEL in policy and practice contexts. Its guiding questions are:

1. What are the recognised standards or guidelines for participatory MEL?

⁹ Marisol Estrella and John Gaventa, ‘Who Counts Reality? Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: A Literature Review’, IDS Working Paper 70 (1998), https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/articles/report/Who_Counts_Reality_Participatory_Monitoring_and_Evaluation_A_Literature_Review/26442646/1/files/48090631.pdf.

¹⁰ Ian Ansley and John Gaventa, ‘Researching for Democracy & Democratizing Research’, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 29, no. 1 (1997): 46–53, world, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091389709603114>.

¹¹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Third edition. (Zed, 2021); Daniel Bendix et al., *Beyond the Master’s Tools?: Decolonizing Knowledge Orders, Research Methods and Teaching* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2020), https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=72fuDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=%22decolonizing+knowledge%22&ots=bMP22T2UFk&sig=lW-_M4Il2uAEiCQkQkwh2VIHZVqY.

¹² Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001>.

¹³ See for example <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/why-participation-matters-0>; <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/7ec97d6d-602c-5525-858a-0bfc6caff7f>

2. What does “high-quality” participatory MEL look like?
3. How do I assess whether a process is credible?
4. What does “good enough” participation look like when constraints are real?
5. How do I avoid tokenism?

Understanding Participation in MEL

The idea of participation in MEL has moved towards more inclusive and democratic approaches to knowledge and decision-making.¹⁴

Within evaluation, participation can refer to the active engagement of stakeholders involved (especially those affected by an intervention) in defining questions, selecting data collection tools suited to the community, analysing data, and interpreting findings. These underlying principles challenge traditional dynamics of power recognising that people have the right and the capacity to analyse their own realities and to judge the success of actions that affect them.¹⁵

Participatory MEL emerged partly in response to dissatisfaction with conventional, externally driven evaluation models. Traditional approaches often assume that professional evaluators, often external, possess the necessary expertise and objectivity, while local participants serve primarily as data providers. In contrast, participatory MEL recognises that all stakeholders hold valuable perspectives and that the involvement of those at the centre of evaluation is not only ethical but enhances the understanding of the inquiry.¹⁶ This recognises that external evaluators may have biases or gaps in understanding which need to be addressed by including stakeholders with different world views and perspectives.

¹⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970; 30th Anniversary Edition, Continuum, 1970); Orlando Fals-Borda, 'The Application of Participatory Action-Research in Latin America', *International Sociology* 2, no. 4 (1987): 329–47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026858098700200401>.

¹⁵ John Gaventa, 'Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis', *IDS Bulletin* (Oxford, UK) 37, no. 6 (2006): 23–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2006.tb00320.x>.

¹⁶ Irene Guijt, *Participatory Approaches, Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation* no. 5 (UNICEF Office of Research, 2014); Marisol Estrella, 'Introduction', in *Learning from Change: Issues and Experiences in Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation*, ed. Marisol Estrella et al. (International Development Research Centre, 2000), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=295206>.

The terminology surrounding participatory evaluation varies. Some organisations emphasise *inclusive evaluation* for example, highlighting representation of diverse, and often marginalised, voices.¹⁷ Others use *collaborative or co-evaluation*.¹⁸ There are also those that promote *responsive evaluation*,¹⁹ positioning evaluation as sensitive towards, focused on, or even led by those it is about and *equitable evaluation* which highlights the importance of including historically marginalised voices. These approaches sit along a *continuum*²⁰. Such a spectrum of participation might range from periphery or token involvement to full-fledged collective ownership of the MEL process.

¹⁷ Includovate, 'Inclusive Evaluation', 30 May 2023, <https://www.includovate.com/inclusive-evaluation/>.

¹⁸ See, for example, Rita G. O'Sullivan, 'Collaborative Evaluation within a Framework of Stakeholder-Oriented Evaluation Approaches', *Evaluation and Program Planning*, Collaborative Evaluation: Theory and Practice, vol. 35, no. 4 (2012): 518–22, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2011.12.005>; Katja Mayer, 'Reflexivity in Co-Evaluation: From Challenges to Principles of Participatory Research Evaluation', in *Revisiting Reflexivity*, ed. Sarah R. Davies et al. (Bristol University Press, 2025), <https://bristoluniversitypressdigital.com/edcollchap-oa/book/9781529244892/ch021.xml>.

¹⁹ Heijster, Hanneke van, Jantien van Berkel, Cécile RL Boot, Tineke Abma, and Emely de Vet. 'Responsive Evaluation: An Innovative Evaluation Methodology for Workplace Health Promotion Interventions'. *BMJ Open* 12, no. 12 (2022): e062320.

²⁰ J. Bradley Cousins and Elizabeth Whitmore, 'Framing Participatory Evaluation', *New Directions for Evaluation* 1998, no. 80 (1998): 5–23, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.1114>; Liz Richardson, 'Participatory

There are many ways of visualising this work, for example:

THE PARTICIPATION CONTINUUM

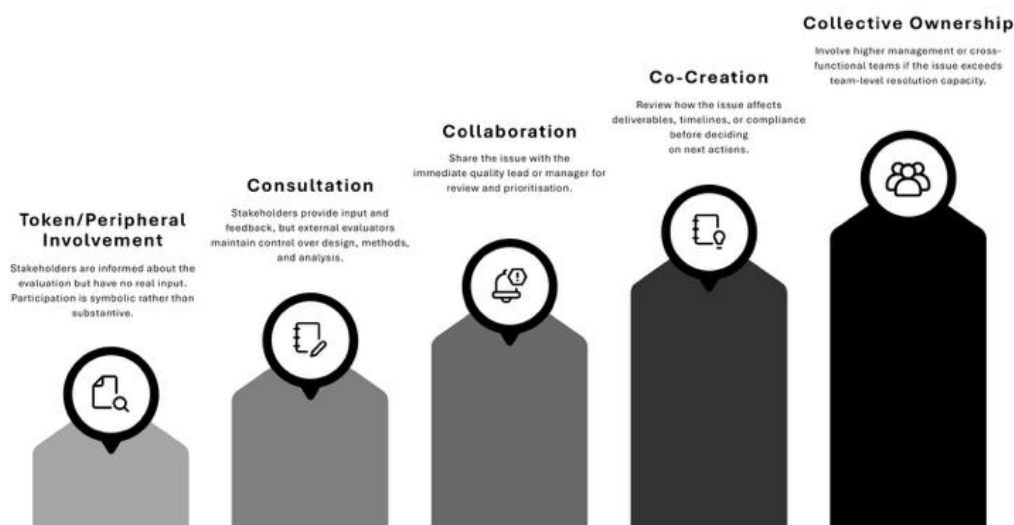
Participatory evaluation exists on a spectrum, from consultative models to fully co-created evaluations.



Source: Cousins & Whitmore (1998), Richardson (2017)

PARTICIPATION ESCALATION LADDER

Adapted from participatory evaluation frameworks



Working in a traditional MEL system, still wanting participation?

You may be working within a MEL system where the evaluator is expected to design the evaluation, collect data, analyse and interpret findings, and report results against predefined requirements. You may be operating within fixed indicators, established rules, reporting cycles, or limited budgets. Not all organisations or teams will have the capacity, or even the priority, to conduct participatory MEL and there are varied and complex contexts within which evaluators work. Even within these constraints, there are concrete ways to introduce meaningful participation across the evaluation process for committed evaluators who wish to avoid the dangers of tokenism.

Start with a realistic ambition. Participation does not necessarily need to replace existing MEL structures. It can be integrated at key stages of the evaluation cycle, strengthening learning and accountability without compromising institutional requirements or going beyond realistic limitations.

Introducing participation across the evaluation process

During evaluation design:

If evaluation questions or indicators are already defined, create opportunities for beneficiaries to review them early. Ask what feels relevant, what feels missing, and how success is understood in their context. Where changes are possible, document them. Where they are not, be transparent about why and understand the risk that this may lead to less desire for beneficiaries to engage in the future. Documenting and eventually sharing this contribution not only shows early forms of inclusion but also provides an important overview of affected stakeholder voices.

During data collection:

Incorporate at least one participatory method, activity, or tool alongside standard MEL practices. Organising an opportunity to engage facilitative storytelling, reflective journalling, use community score cards, or enable any listening activities which when done well will allow people to contribute insights that structured surveys or interviews may not capture. Insights from any such engagements can be incorporated within existing MEL reporting and help to either corroborate or challenge findings from other data.

During analysis and interpretation:

Before finalising, bring participants together to help make sense or verify emerging findings from the evaluation. Share any preliminary findings in accessible language and invite reflection on accuracy, meaning, and unintended effects. Provide an opportunity to allow those directly implicated by the evaluation to shape findings or at least comment and make their voices heard on them. This step often offers the greatest opportunity for participation when design constraints are fixed.

During development of findings and recommendations:

Use community interpretations to inform conclusions and practical recommendations. Make references to prior engagement with communities or beneficiaries. This helps ensure that findings are contextually grounded and relevant to those affected.

During reporting and sharing:

Plan how findings will be returned to participants. Ask the participants who have been involved how findings should be returned to them and their communities. Show clearly how community input influenced interpretations, recommendations, or decisions.

Three practical checks to consider the potential of tokenism in participation

Influence check: At which stages of the evaluation cycle do participants have real influence, and how is this evidenced? Where is influence limited?²¹

Inclusion check: Who is included at each stage, who is missing, and what steps are taken to address this? Where has inclusion not been possible?

Feedback check: How will contributors see how their input shaped findings or actions? Where may their input be missing at each stage?

What to document for transparency and accountability

- How participation was integrated at different stages of the evaluation process.
- What changed as a result of community input.
- What could not change due to institutional constraints.
- How ethical and safety considerations were addressed.

If you only do one thing: prioritise participation in analysis and interpretation, where community knowledge can most directly strengthen the quality and legitimacy of evaluation findings and provide an opportunity for beneficiaries to influence, and even possibly take further ownership, of them.

²¹ Primer 2 examines tokenism at the level of the partnership itself, noting that 'being included in a partnership does not necessarily mean having the ability to shape it' and that 'the line between inclusion and tokenism in partnership can be difficult to identify from the outside, and even harder to challenge from within.' See Primer 2, 'Common dilemmas and trade-offs' section.

Principles of Participatory MEL

Participatory MEL is about working with intended community beneficiaries to shape both the evaluation process and the results, extending ownership to all those involved rather than keeping it in the hands of external actors.

Co-creation/shared ownership

Co-creation can include jointly identifying what should be measured, deciding how information will be gathered, interpreting findings together, and agreeing on what actions should follow. When people contribute to designing and making sense of an evaluation, the outcomes are more likely to reflect their realities and priorities. Shared ownership also strengthens commitment to using the findings, since they are not imposed from outside but emerge from a collective and participatory process. In this way, co-creation shifts evaluation from a technical exercise to a collaborative process that builds on the value of local knowledge and supports meaningful change.

Inclusion

Participation is riddled with challenges in attaining inclusion, particularly around who participates and whose knowledge counts in both processes and outputs of MEL and broader inquiry to understanding. Participatory MEL aims to widen the scope of who is at the table making decisions, who is involved in the process, and who is acknowledged as knowledge producers when results are shared²².

Transparency and flexibility

Involving those who are at the centre of MEL objectives not only provides an opportunity to understand issues from insider perspectives, but also promotes greater transparency and rigour in both the process and the findings that emerge. Participation at every stage can serve as checks and balances, creating space to reflect and adjust course as evaluation unfolds in real time. This not only helps to validate the process, but also centres reflective practice as a key dimension of MEL, ensuring that findings genuinely reflect what is taking place for those involved in evaluation.

Continued learning

MEL processes which support space for the participation of intended community beneficiaries are a collaborative journey that fosters opportunities for ongoing learning,

²² Primer 2 develops these questions in the context of ODA partnerships, asking who is the community, who sets the agenda, who controls the resources, and whose knowledge counts. See Primer 2, 'Power and voice in practice' section.

ownership, and a shifting of power relationships. In participatory MEL, learning is not only something captured at the end of an evaluation, but something that takes place throughout the process itself. As people may analyse their own data, discuss emerging insights, and make sense of what is happening in real time, they gain new understanding that can immediately shape practice. This ongoing learning is part of the value of participation. At the same time, learning is also an outcome, reflected in changes to knowledge, skills, or ways of working that result from the evaluation. For example, community members who conduct MEL related inquiry may develop confidence in asking questions or identifying patterns, while organisations may shift strategies after recognising gaps highlighted by participants. Seeing learning as both process and outcome reinforces the idea that MEL is not only about accountability, but also about growth and adaptation for everyone involved. Such an opportunity can tie MEL into broader objectives of projects and programming not simply as an obligatory activity to be carried out, but as part of the learning objectives of everyone involved through a collaborative partnership.

Approaches, Tools and Frameworks

Participation in MEL is not a single technique, but a guiding orientation grounded in the commitment to dialogue, inclusion, and shared sense-making.

It is important to remember when applying specific approaches, tools and frameworks that the degree and form of participation depend on:

- **Context** – for example a physical context of insecurity, or a social context of divisions between groups, or a political context of surveillance.
- **Power Relations** – for example decision-making hierarchies, social norms, or reliance of communities on external resources for survival.
- **Purpose** – for example whether a MEL process is driven by accountability to donors or primarily concerned with generating knowledge to inform projects.

Understanding these nuances is essential for applying participatory approaches in ways that are credible, ethical, and feasible within diverse institutional settings. There is freedom in the design and choice of tools. The following participatory MEL approaches, techniques, and methods provide some insight into how these nuances can be recognised and negotiated. They have been selected from a large number of options to represent the range of different possible approaches. Each tool can be adapted or new tools designed based on what works best for the community member providing the data.

Outcome Mapping

Outcome Mapping is a participatory approach for planning and assessing change. It begins by identifying the people or groups a programme works most closely with and describing how their behaviour, relationships, or actions should ideally change. Together, the team and partners create progress markers to show what early, deeper, and sustained change would look like. They then plan strategies to support these changes and use regular reflection sessions or journals to review what is happening and why. Outcome mapping thus works with specific partners rather than community members to ensure participation. Rather than proving impact, Outcome Mapping helps teams learn from experience, adapt their actions, and strengthen collaboration as change happens throughout.²³

²³ Sarah Earl, Outcome Mapping: Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs, with Michael Quinn Patton et al. (International Development Research Centre, 2001).

Most Significant Change

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a participatory way to monitor and learn from stories of real change. It begins by deciding what kinds of stories to collect, such as those about empowerment, livelihoods, or relationships. Field staff or participants are then asked what they think has been the most significant change in that area. These stories are shared and discussed in groups to decide which ones show the most meaningful results and why. The discussion reveals what different people value, helps uncover unexpected outcomes, and strengthens shared learning. Over time, repeated cycles of story collection, reflection, and feedback make programmes more responsive, transparent, and grounded in people's lived experience.²⁴

Outcome Harvesting

Outcome Harvesting is a participatory approach for identifying and analysing what has changed as a result of a programme and how it contributed to that change. Instead of measuring progress against preset indicators, it begins by collecting evidence of actual changes in people's behaviour, relationships, actions, or policies, and then works backwards to understand the programme's influence. Teams which may, but do not necessarily, include community members gather information from reports, interviews, or observations, verify it with others, and discuss why each outcome matters. The process helps uncover both expected and unexpected results, supports learning, and strengthens decision-making in complex and evolving contexts.²⁵

Participatory Video

Participatory Video uses video for communities to tell their own stories of change. Instead of relying on written reports or outside experts, people record what matters to them, showing real experiences, challenges, and progress in their own words and images. Filming, storyboarding, and community screenings become ways to reflect together, share ideas, and discuss what success looks like. The process can sit alongside other MEL approaches like logical frameworks or MSC, making them more grounded and

²⁴ Bronwen McDonald et al., 'Most Significant Change', Better Evaluation, 28 June 2024, <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/most-significant-change>. Rick Davies and Jess Dart (2005) *The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A guide to its use*, available at: <https://www.mande.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/MSCGuide.pdf>

²⁵ Ricardo Wilson-Grau et al., 'Outcome Harvesting', Better Evaluation, 27 June 2024, <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/approaches/outcome-harvesting>.

participatory. Participatory video can also help communities in evaluation to take ownership of how their stories are seen, understood, and used to guide future action.²⁶

Everyday Peace Indicators

The Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) approach offers a practical way to make MEL more inclusive and contextually grounded. Instead of applying universal indicators, EPI begins by facilitating community workshops where people identify their own signs of peace and recovery in daily life. These locally defined indicators are then translated into measurable survey questions and tracked over time to assess changes. By integrating community perspectives into evaluation frameworks, EPI enhances accuracy, accountability, and relevance, ensuring that what is measured and ultimately funded or scaled reflects local priorities, relational dynamics, and lived experiences of peace.²⁷

Participatory Impact Pathways Analysis

Participatory Impact Pathways Analysis (PIPA) is a step-by-step planning and MEL method that starts with a workshop involving project teams, partners, and community members. Together they map how project activities can lead to real change. Participants first identify the main problems and then imagine what success would look like. They draw network maps to show how different people and organisations are connected now and how they need to work together in the future. These insights are used to create a clear plan linking activities to results, with measurable goals and milestones. Regular reflection sessions then review progress and adjust strategies as needed.²⁸

Facilitative Listening Design

Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) is an inquiry tool that enables those whom the inquiry concerns to lead it collaboratively. As an MEL method, FLD engages direct participants to conduct inquiry through a structured listening process rather than through conventional interviews or surveys. It is particularly valuable in sensitive contexts or when topics may not be comfortably discussed in standard evaluation environments. Instead of being externally assessed, participants who represent or belong to the communities being studied take on the role of *Listeners*, engaging others they consider part of their community in conversational inquiry. They then collectively process and

²⁶ Isabelle Lemaire and Chris Lunch, 'Using Participatory Video in Monitoring and Evaluation', in *Handbook of Participatory Video*, ed. E. J. Milne et al. (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/monash/detail.action?docID=1037804>.

²⁷ Pamina Firchow, 'Introduction', in *Reclaiming Everyday Peace: Local Voices in Measurement and Evaluation after War*, ed. Pamina Firchow (University Press, 2018). See also Primer 3, Contribution 4: Everyday Peace Indicators, where the approach is described directly by practitioners applying it in Sri Lanka, Colombia, Sudan, Yemen and Burundi.

²⁸ Sophie Alvarez et al., 'Participatory Impact Pathways Analysis: A Practical Method for Project Planning and Evaluation', *Development in Practice* 20, no. 8 (2010): 946–58.

analyse what they have heard to deepen thematic understanding from their own perspectives. By centring inquiry leadership and meaning-making within the community itself, FLD ensures that findings are co-constructed, reflexive, and grounded in the lived experience of those MEL activities aim to better understand.²⁹

Community Score Card

The Community Score Card (CSC) is a participatory approach that uses a score card tool to improve the quality, accountability, and responsiveness of public services. It brings service users and service providers into a structured process of reflection and dialogue on how services are experienced in practice, including gaps between intended standards and everyday realities by those who access them. Communities develop and score locally defined indicators, explain the reasons behind their scores, and identify priority areas for change. Service providers undertake a parallel scoring exercise from their own perspective. These perspectives are then brought together in a facilitated interface meeting, where findings are discussed and priorities are negotiated. This meeting consolidates the process into a joint action plan. Through repeated cycles of scoring, meetings, and follow-up, the CSC approach can further support ongoing learning and continuous improvement in MEL processes rather than one-off assessment or proof of impact.³⁰

²⁹ Women Peace Makers, The FLD Handbook: Using Facilitative Listening Design for Your Project (Women Peace Makers, 2017), <https://wpmcambodia.files.wordpress.com/2018/06/fld-guidebook.pdf>.

³⁰ CARE Malawi. The Community Score Card (CSC): A Generic Guide for Implementing CARE's CSC Process to Improve Quality of Services. CARE Technical Guidance. 2013. https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/CARE_Community_Score_Card_Toolkit.pdf.

Practical Guidance

The most important question is how to make MEL as participatory as possible in any single context.

The aim of this primer is to encourage those working in MEL to consider participatory approaches in their practice. However, it is very likely that your institutional context, policies, and MEL obligations vary considerably. There is no one-size-fits-all to MEL, particularly in implementing participatory methods in practice³¹. Integrating participatory elements into MEL does not require a complete overhaul of existing systems. It involves making deliberate choices about where and how intended participant communities can shape the process. Participation can sit on a spectrum, and different levels are possible depending on context, resources, and organisational openness.

This section focuses on how to *do* participation in contexts ranging from more restrictive to more flexible. Tiers of participation vary and considering how to incorporate such degrees into existing MEL frameworks or developing new ones will be to the choice of those in MEL design and decision-making roles. Making clear who was included, not included, and why is vital for upholding a principle of transparency.

Lighter-touch participation (low-resource, restrictive contexts)

Involve community members or beneficiaries in defining or reviewing indicators.

Inviting community members to shape indicators is one of the simplest ways to bring participation into an existing MEL system. This should happen as early as possible, ideally at the point where the evaluation framework is being developed. Those who fall under the scope of the evaluation help identify what matters, what change looks like to them, and which signs of progress feel meaningful in their lived reality. Their input may be used to adapt existing indicators, add new ones, or reframe how change is understood.

Questions to ask:

1. Will community members be present in indicator discussions and are there clear plans for how they will contribute?
2. When will they be invited to participate so that their views shape the framework rather than being added after decisions have been made?
3. How will their input be reflected in the final set of indicators and communicated back to them?

³¹ Primer 3 illustrates this directly through four contributions from very different contexts, noting the 'necessity of adapting to context and avoiding one-size-fits all approaches.' See Primer 3, Introduction.

Integrate participatory tools within standard data collection. Participatory tools can be woven into routine data collection to create space for beneficiaries to share their experiences in their own terms. Short story prompts, reflective diaries, and anonymous community cards help surface perspectives that structured questions often miss. These tools add depth to quantitative or interview-based methods by capturing lived experience, emotion, and nuance. They are especially helpful when people may feel uncomfortable speaking openly or when evaluators want to understand how change is felt and narrated by communities themselves.

Questions to ask:

1. Which participatory tool, approach or framework will be used and why is it suitable for this context?
2. How will the tool allow beneficiaries to express experiences in their own words?
3. How will their contributions be incorporated into the analysis or findings?

Allow community members or beneficiaries to be involved in making sense of the evaluation. Involving community members in the interpretation of data strengthens both the quality and the legitimacy of an evaluation. Once data is collected, creating space for beneficiaries to reflect on patterns, themes, and unexpected findings helps ground the analysis in lived experience. Sense-making workshops, group reflections, or facilitated discussions enable participants to share how they understand the results, what feels accurate or incomplete, and what implications they see for future action. This collaboration helps shift analysis from a technical exercise to a shared process of understanding the bigger picture.

Questions to ask:

1. Who will be invited to take part in sense-making discussions and why?
2. How will participants be supported to interpret the data in ways that feel safe and meaningful?
3. How will their insights shape the final conclusions or recommendations?

Moderate participation (mid-range organisational flexibility)

Engage community representatives as co-evaluators during information collection. Aligning the MEL approach to be collaborative repositions the evaluator and those from the evaluated target groups as a shared team. This begins as early as possible, since meaningful participation starts in the development stage rather than at the point of data collection. Roles and responsibilities are developed together, and co-evaluators are treated as equals in both structure and practice. It could be helpful to co-develop a set of principles at the beginning that outline how you will work together and ensure co-creation and then check in on those principles regularly as a group to see if you are adhering to them and if you are not how you can improve. Involving community representatives as co-evaluators to gather in information in their own community

contexts, strengthens contextual depth, credibility, and relational trust of the evaluation. Their presence during information collection supports culturally appropriate questioning, surfaces issues that may otherwise be missed, and often creates a more open environment for participants to share their experiences compared with external evaluators.

Questions to ask:

1. How will community co-evaluators be selected in a way that is fair and inclusive?
2. What roles and responsibilities will they hold during information collection?
3. How will the evaluation process ensure that co-evaluators' perspectives influence what is asked and how information is gathered?

Co-develop evaluation questions with stakeholders. Working directly with those who will be affected by the evaluation to shape its questions ensures that the inquiry begins from their realities rather than being imposed on them. Co-developing questions goes further than involving communities in indicators. It means collaboratively defining the very issues, concerns, and priorities that the evaluation will later explore. Because these questions will ultimately be turned back toward them once the evaluation begins, developing them together helps ensure fairness, clarity, and alignment with lived experience. This early collaboration strengthens relevance, builds shared ownership, and helps establish an evaluation framework that is respectful, grounded, and responsive to the people at the centre of the work.

Questions to ask:

1. Who will be included in shaping the evaluation questions and how will their voices be brought in?
2. How will community priorities be reflected in the final set of questions?
3. Do the agreed questions feel fair, relevant, and accurate to those who will be evaluated?

Use an established participatory method directly in the broader MEL process. Although this document presents several participatory methods as examples, there are many more, some longstanding and others newer or still emerging. Using established participatory tools within MEL can deepen inclusion and broaden whose experiences shape the evaluation during both planning and implementation. These approaches create space for participants to speak on their own terms, highlight what matters in their specific contexts, and engage with the process in meaningful and accessible ways. Integrating such tools strengthens the relevance of the evaluation and enhances its legitimacy among stakeholders, particularly those who the evaluation is ultimately about.

Questions to ask:

1. Which participatory tool is most appropriate for the context and purpose of the evaluation?
2. How will the tool enable participants to share experiences in their own words or ways?
3. How will insights generated through the tool be used within the overall analysis?

Deep participation

Evaluation teams composed of community evaluators. Forming evaluation teams that include community evaluators shifts the process from external assessment to a more shared and grounded approach to understanding the focus of the activity. Community or representative evaluators bring contextual knowledge, social trust, cultural understanding, and lived experience that external evaluators may not hold. Their involvement helps create more open conversations, background into local priorities, and reduce the distance between those assessing and those being assessed. When community members serve as evaluators, they contribute to shaping the evaluation approach, gathering information, interpreting findings, and informing recommendations. This strengthens the accuracy, depth, and credibility of the evaluation and can increase its acceptance among the beneficiaries involved.

Questions to ask:

1. How will community or representative evaluators be selected in a fair and inclusive way?
2. What roles and responsibilities will they take on within the evaluation team?
3. How will they be supported to participate confidently and safely in the process?
4. How will power dynamics be surfaced and addressed to ensure community members are co-creators?

Shared decision-making about interpretations, recommendations, and reporting.

Shared decision-making invites community members to shape the meaning and direction of the evaluation rather than simply supplying data. When stakeholders work alongside evaluators to interpret findings, develop recommendations, and decide how results are communicated, the evaluation becomes more accurate, grounded, and legitimate. This approach recognises that those closest to the issues often hold insights that external evaluators may miss. It also helps ensure that conclusions are fair, contextually appropriate, and aligned with the lived realities of those the evaluation concerns. Shared decision making strengthens ownership, increases the likelihood that recommendations will be acted upon, and supports transparent, inclusive reporting.



Questions to ask:

1. Who will be involved in interpreting evaluation findings and shaping recommendations?
2. How will community perspectives influence final decisions about what is emphasised or reported?
3. How will shared decisions be documented and communicated to all stakeholders?

Core Considerations for Participatory MEL

The level of participation of community members directly shapes how participatory MEL is designed, implemented, and ultimately understood by stakeholders. It influences the extent to which communities can meaningfully contribute to decision making, the credibility of the evaluation results, and the overall legitimacy of the process. Across all configurations, however, several challenges remain consistent. It is therefore essential to consider a number of core factors at every stage of the MEL cycle, from planning through to implementation, and in understanding results to the sharing of those findings:

1. How do I avoid tokenism and ensure genuine participation?
2. How do I balance accountability and learning?
3. What kinds of institutional barriers and power imbalances do I need to be aware of?
4. What are the ethical issues involved in “going participatory”?
5. What are the practical time constraints involved and how do I realistically work with them in a participatory process?
6. How does my own positionality or my status as an evaluator play into the dynamics of a participatory MEL process or activity?

Further Resources

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