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Participation and Partnership in MEL: Perspectives from Peace and Conflict- Affected Communities



Primer in Brief

Participation and Partnership in MEL: Perspectives from Peace and Conflict-Affected Communities: What You Need to Know¹

Peace and conflict-affected communities are increasingly recognised as crucial partners in monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL). Yet discussions about participation are very often shaped by others such as academics, donors, evaluators, and implementing organisations rather than communities themselves. This final primer brings together reflections from those on the ground who engage in practice, and with communities most often positioned at the beneficiary end of international development, humanitarian, and conflict programming.

The contributions offer grounded reflections on what meaningful participation and partnership look like from the authors' perspectives. They reveal practical opportunities and persistent challenges in designing participatory MEL processes that are more accountable, context sensitive, and responsive to local realities.

Key Takeaways

1. Participation begins with influence.

Meaningful participation starts with affected communities in shaping questions, indicators, learning priorities, and decisions.

2. Communities are partners in ongoing learning.

Peace and conflict-affected communities bring contextual knowledge, lived experience, and local realities to the table that can strengthen MEL findings.

3. Relationships matter.

Investing in relationships helps create the conditions for ethical engagement, transparent conversations, and trust-building between partners.

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4. Participation strengthens understanding and can contribute to change.

Participatory MEL produces more relevant and actionable evidence while also creating opportunities for change through reflection and relationship-building.

This primer not only explores the value of participation and partnership in MEL but also seeks to put these principles into practice. This primer aims to create space for those who are most often positioned as participants in MEL processes to directly shape the conversation.

Participation and Partnership in MEL: Perspectives from Peace and Conflict-Affected Communities

This primer has been prepared by the Warwick Interdisciplinary Research Centre for International Development and the Humanitarian Advisory Group, in collaboration with researchers and practitioners in peace and conflict-affected communities.

This is the third in a series of three primers published as an output of 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. Primer 1 focuses on *Participatory Approaches to Monitoring and Evaluation: Learning and Accountability Through Inclusion* and Primer 2 focuses on *Evaluating Partnerships: Equitable Participation for Effective ODA Delivery*.

Building on Primer 1 and Primer 2 (see figure 2) this primer engages with and learns from peace and conflict-affected communities. Listening to the voices of those who are so often the partner in participatory MEL provides valuable insights into what works and what good enough participatory MEL looks like. Including these perspectives in the primer series ensures:

- Participatory MEL design is informed by the views and experiences of diverse stakeholders.
- MEL in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is informed by ongoing learning in partnership with affected communities.
- MEL teams are equipped with key principles and practices to be able to build relevant partnerships with affected communities.

Each contribution to this primer draws from varied experiences and perspectives from communities in different countries and with different resources (see figure 1). This breadth is important for recognising the complexities of partnerships and participation and the necessity of adapting to context and avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches.

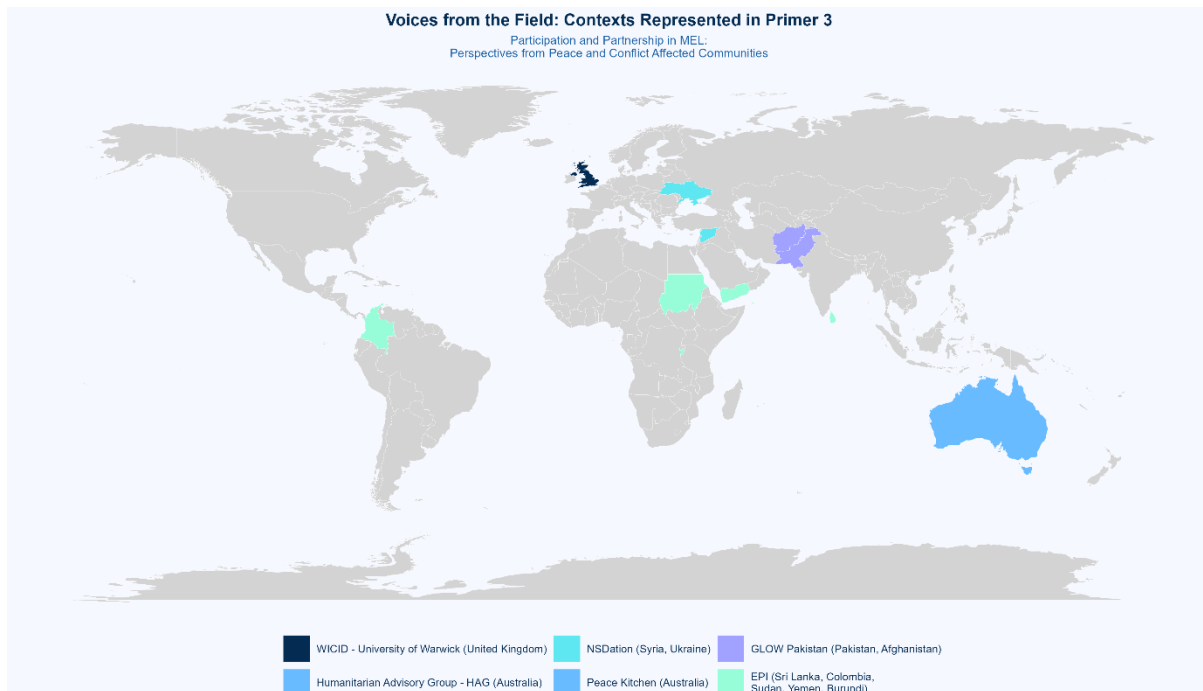


Figure 1: Geographic reach of Primer 3 contributions

Several common messages are evident throughout the primer. Contributors highlight that meaningful participation goes beyond tools and methods and is located in how and to what extent communities can influence learning processes and ultimately understand how their input and involvement inform decisions. Participation itself is framed or implied as an ongoing process in which trust, accountability, transparency, and responsiveness are all criteria in assessing its perceived success.

The contributors also emphasise the value in recognising communities and local actors as partners in generating and making sense of evidence, whose particular understanding and insight can contribute deeper understanding of the complexity and contextual background of the contexts in which they operate. These reflections show both practical challenges and potential opportunities in considering participatory approaches that are context-sensitive, ethical, and can produce more relevant and actionable learning.

Throughout this primer we cross-reference with lessons from Primer 1 and Primer 2 and suggest additional resources as well as offer reflections on emerging trends and opportunities for institutional change.

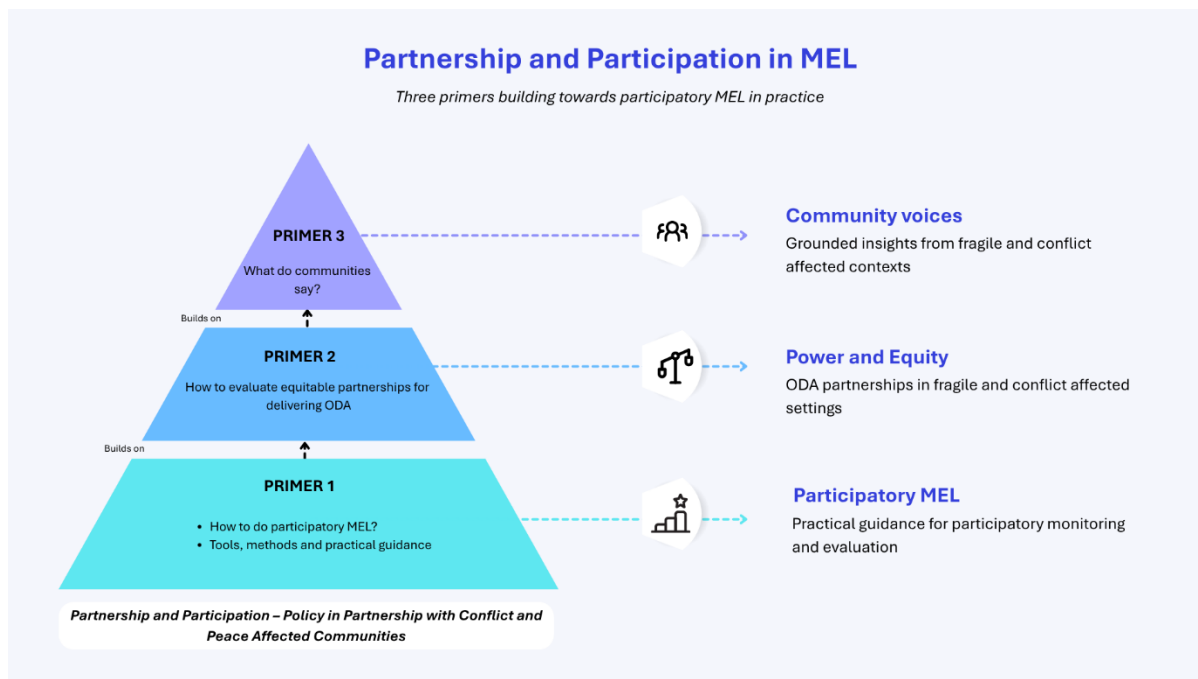


Figure 2: Partnership and Participation in MEL - Three primers building towards participatory MEL in practice

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NSDation: Starting Participation at Inception



Author: Aya Yagan

Starting Participation at Inception

This contribution draws on NSDation's practice as a local research and evaluation organisation working on externally commissioned MEL across conflict, displacement, disaster, and protracted crisis settings, including earthquake responses, Ukraine emergency, and recovery programming, third-party monitoring in Syria, and localisation and community-led research. In this role, NSDation often sits between affected communities, field researchers, implementing partners, international agencies, and commissioners.

Our experience is that participation is frequently requested in evaluation terms of reference, but the conditions for meaningful participation are not always built into the design, budget, timeline or programme culture². This contribution therefore focuses on practical ways to strengthen participation at the design and inception stage.

Start with a Participation Feasibility Check

A practical first step is to include a participation feasibility check as part of inception: a structured conversation between the commissioner, programme team, partners, evaluation team, and field researchers. The aim is not to make broad claims about being “participatory”, but to define what level of participation is realistic and meaningful in context.

This check could explore what is possible within the time, budget, and access conditions; what may be unsafe, inappropriate or extractive; which groups can participate safely; what is fixed and what can still change; and where community input can influence questions, tools, indicators, analysis or recommendations.

This is particularly important when the programme itself has not been designed around deep community participation. An evaluation cannot fully compensate for this, but it can avoid overclaiming and identify small, honest points of influence³. The output could be explicit: who will participate, when, for what purpose, and what they can influence.

2 As Primer 1 notes, 'even within these constraints, there are concrete ways to introduce meaningful participation across the evaluation process.' See Primer 1, 'Working in a Traditional MEL System, Still Wanting Participation?' section.

3 As Primer 1 states, '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



Include Early Community-Informed Consultation Before Finalising the MEL Framework

Once the level of participation is agreed, MEL teams could create space for short community-informed consultations before the MEL framework is finalised. Their purpose is to understand what affected people think the MEL should pay attention to. This could be done through small group discussions, informal conversations, community mapping or participatory ranking⁴.

The questions can be simple: What changes matter most to you? What would tell you that this support was useful, safe, fair or respectful? What do outsiders often miss when evaluating this type of assistance? What would you want decision-makers to understand from your experience?

Participatory ranking can draw on Participative Ranking Methodology (PRM), a mixed-methods approach where participants generate and rank responses to a shared question, producing qualitative insights that can also be compared across groups⁵. Communities can rank issues such as safety, fairness, dignity, access, information, feedback mechanisms, inclusion, and longer-term effects.

Communities can also define what “quality” means in practice. Alongside technical indicators such as timeliness, coverage, satisfaction or compliance, quality may mean dignity, clear selection criteria, access without informal costs, trusted feedback mechanisms, safety, or support arriving when it is most needed.

In a light-touch inception process, this could involve two to four short consultations, each with around six to eight participants, conducted by the evaluation team before finalising the MEL framework. Participants could be purposively selected to reflect key community groups and risks, such as gender, age, disability, displacement status, location or access barriers.

Document How Community and Local Actor Input Shaped the Design

Participation becomes more credible when it is visible and documented. MEL teams could require the inception report to include a short “participation trail” showing how

compromising institutional requirements.’ See Primer 1, ‘Working in a Traditional MEL System, Still Wanting Participation?’ section.

⁴ As Primer 1 states, ‘participatory tools can be woven into routine data collection to create space for beneficiaries to share their experiences in their own terms.’ These include community score cards, most significant change, and outcome harvesting, among others. See Primer 1, ‘Approaches, Tools and frameworks’ section.

⁵ Ager, A., Stark, L. and Potts, A. (2010) Participative Ranking Methodology: A Brief Guide, Version 1.1. Program on Forced Migration and Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York.

community and local actor input shaped the methodology, tools, indicators and learning priorities⁶.

Input received during inception	Design decision made
Field researchers noted that direct questions about complaints may be perceived as risky or linked to authority structures	Reframed questions around trust, preferred feedback channels, perceived safety and whether people would use the mechanism in practice
Community members said “privacy” mattered more than the technical quality of shelter repairs	Added indicators on whether repairs improved household privacy, dignity and safety, not only whether works met technical standards
Women and older people noted that distance was not the only access barrier; timing, accompaniment, and social norms also shaped access	Added questions on time of day, need for accompaniment, acceptable access routes and gender/age-specific mobility constraints
Field researchers noted that people may avoid saying “unsafe” directly	Added indirect questions on movement restrictions, places/times people avoid, who can access services comfortably, and whether some groups prefer remote or intermediary channels
Community members said the main issue was not receiving information late, but receiving different messages from different actors	Added indicators on consistency of communication, trusted information sources and whether people knew where to verify information
Local researchers observed that “household head” responses could hide differences within the household	Adjusted sampling/tools to include women, young people, older people or caregivers separately where safe and feasible
Community members said cash/voucher value was less important than what could actually be bought locally	Added questions on market availability, transport to vendors, price changes, item quality and hidden transaction costs

⁶ As Primer 1 states, '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.' See Primer 1, 'Key Takeaways' section.

Finally, participation should not shift costs onto affected people. It should not cost people money, safety, dignity or time they cannot afford⁷. This means considering transport, childcare, refreshments, accessibility, timing, privacy, safeguarding and emotional burden.

Key Messages

1. Include a feasibility check during inception.
2. Consult community members on MEL frameworks.
3. Document the participation trail.
4. Consider costs of participation and how to minimise this.

⁷ As Primer 2 notes, 'local partners might take on significant roles in data collection, coordination, or community engagement, sometimes without recognition or appropriate compensation. What can be described as participation or collaboration can be instead felt as extractive by those involved, particularly when contributions outweigh benefit.' See Primer 2, 'Common Dilemmas and Trade-offs' section.

Peace Kitchen: Relational Participation



Author: Elaine Mei Lien Pratley

Peace Kitchen is guided by a simple question in its approach to MEL: is participation serving relationships, or serving institutional evidence needs?⁸

Food as Method

Peace Kitchen is an Australian-based social enterprise facilitating dialogue across divides and difference through the shared language of food. What began in 2018 as a small community-building initiative at a local university gradually evolved into a broader research and practice project, now documented in *Hungry for Peace*⁹. Peace Kitchen approaches shared meals as both facilitation techniques and relational spaces in themselves. Rather than relying primarily on interviews, surveys, or externally driven evaluation activities, food-centred facilitation creates informal spaces where reflection emerges naturally through conversation, cooking, eating, washing dishes, and lingering together at the table. In these settings, people often share experiences and insights in ways that feel less tokenistic and less extractive.

Food-as-method positions participation within monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) as more than a mechanism for collecting data. Instead, it becomes a peacebuilding-centred, relational process through which knowledge, connection, and understanding emerge together¹⁰.

This approach emerged partly from our discomfort with how participation can sometimes operate within MEL processes. In development and social impact work, organisations and the communities they serve are often expected to continuously provide stories, reflections, or evidence of change in ways that ultimately serve donor accountability more than the people involved. Yet trust-building depends on

⁸ As Primer 2 notes, 'decisions about priorities, methods, or interpretations of findings can be shaped more by external expectations than by local needs, even within partnerships that aim to be participatory.' See Primer 2, 'Common Dilemmas and Trade-offs' section.

⁹ Pratley, E. M. L. (2026). *Hungry for peace: Food peacebuilding in an entangled world*. Edinburgh University Press.

¹⁰ This connects to Primer 2's discussion of tokenism in partnerships, which notes that 'being included in a partnership does not necessarily mean having the ability to shape it.' Food-as-method addresses this by ensuring communities shape the terms, pace and boundaries of participation themselves. See Primer 2, 'Common Dilemmas and Trade-offs' section.

slowness, care, and people feeling free not to participate out of obligation to evaluators. Based on our experiences as peace practitioners and researchers, Peace Kitchen made a conscious decision that evaluation processes should not undermine the trust and connection that our work was trying to build.

In practice, this meant participants were not obliged to provide emotional labour or evidence of impact for institutional purposes¹¹. Instead, they participated on their own terms, deciding whether, when, and how they wished to contribute to reflective or evaluative processes. Most people attend Peace Kitchen because they want to share a meal, meet people outside their social bubbles, and experience genuine connection. Learning therefore emerged informally through participant-initiated conversations, repeated attendance, follow-up relationships, unsolicited participant feedback shared online, and facilitators' reflections over time, rather than through highly structured assessment tools.

Rethinking Evidence in Participatory MEL

This organic and evolving approach reframes what counts as evidence within participatory MEL. In our work, impact is not always visible through predefined indicators or numerical metrics alone. Sometimes it appears through subtle shifts: a participant returning with family members, new questions being raised, or relationships continuing long after a Peace Kitchen session ends. Sometimes participants later send emails recounting unexpected 'aha' moments from the session.

At one gathering, a child rights campaigner shared her vision of a world where women and children feel safe. A man seated beside her responded defensively, asking whether men should be treated as second-rate citizens. One of our facilitators gently wondered aloud whether the vision might feel more inclusive if reframed as "a safer world for all." They agreed.

Perhaps it was the morning tea in everyone's stomachs that softened tensions. Perhaps it was the facilitator's gentle invitation to move from oppositional, rights-based language towards language grounded in shared needs and collective wellbeing. Perhaps it was something else entirely. We can never be certain.

Yet, this uncertainty is also a part of dialogue work. Many of the most meaningful shifts in peacebuilding are relational, atmospheric, and difficult to isolate or measure

¹¹ Food-as-method responds to what Primer 2 calls the risk of extractive participation, where 'what can be described as participation or collaboration can be instead felt as extractive by those involved, particularly when contributions outweigh benefit.' See Primer 2, 'Common Dilemmas and Trade-offs' section.

neatly. What we do know is that these forms of knowledge are embodied, relational, and often central to understanding how trust and social cohesion develop in everyday life.

Undoubtedly, this unstructured form of participation does not always resemble conventional MEL practice. It also comes with trade-offs. We will likely never produce the impressive metrics many donors seek. Yet we believe the insights we do gather offer a rich complementary layer to evidence generated through other methods.

Because our relationship with most participants is limited to a single gathering, documenting individual attitudinal or behavioural change over the long term is rarely possible. As a relatively young initiative, and because communities are rarely in a financial position to invite us back regularly, we cannot yet draw on longitudinal observations or repeat participation. Instead, participant-led reflections, facilitators' field notes, and social media engagement provide relational evidence that helps us understand some of the attitudinal shifts and insights emerging from our gatherings.

We continue to experiment with ways of inviting these reflections. We have recently introduced QR codes on tables, allowing participants to share stories or feedback after the gathering if they wish. In practice, however, the richest insights often emerge through informal conversations immediately afterwards, which facilitators document in their field notes. When working with established communities, local leaders may also share observations of participants speaking up when they would normally remain silent or expressing perspectives that surprise those who know them well. Some participants also share social media posts with us, offering further insight into the reflections that remained with them after the gathering. Occasionally, participants are willing to record a short video reflection at the end of a session, although we only invite such contributions when they are appropriate to the group and do not detract from the atmosphere of the dialogue.

Still, the tension remains. How do we provide sufficient evidence that is both non-extractive and capable of meeting reporting requirements?

1. **Relational spaces should be protected** – meaningful evidence will arise from respectful relationships and may only include small shifts.

2. **Participatory approaches should be adapted to context**¹² – with food-as-method, we are attentive to hierarchies around caste, class, gender, religion, or social status¹³. This is important to avoid inadvertent exclusion.
3. **Participatory partnership means communities helping shape not only the conversation itself, but also the terms, pace, and boundaries of participation** - Food-as-method offers one pathway towards participation grounded less in extraction and more in reciprocity, contextual sensitivity, and genuine partnership. Where food-as-method is inappropriate, lean into other local practices for culturally informed relational participation methods.

Key Messages:

1. Be mindful of core purpose and make sure that participatory MEL is aligned.
2. Adapt participatory MEL to context.
3. Map the different forms that evidence can take.

¹² Food-as-method reflects what Primer 1 identifies as essential considerations for participatory approaches, noting that 'the degree and form of participation depend on context, power relations, and purpose.' See Primer 1, 'Approaches, Tools and Frameworks' section.

¹³ Pratley, E. M. L. (2026). Hungry for peace: Food peacebuilding in an entangled world. Edinburgh University Press, chapter 1.

GLOW: Learning from Pakistan



Author: Saeed Ullah Khan, GLOW Consultants

Participation in conflict-affected settings is not a technical MEL tool but a prerequisite for credible evidence and ethical engagement. Drawing on GLOW¹⁴ Consultants' experience in Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas¹⁵ (FATA), Swat (Home district of Malala Yousafzai)¹⁶, and Afghan refugee contexts, this contribution argues that meaningful participation requires completing feedback loops, investing in relationships, and shifting from 'consulting communities' to 'learning with communities.' Donors must tolerate honest reporting on failure and exclusion to enable genuine partnership.

Why is the Participation of Conflict and Peace-Affected Communities Important for MEL Processes and Outcomes?

Based on GLOW's experience, participation is important because conflict and peace-affected communities understand risks, needs, power relations, and programme effects in ways that external actors often miss¹⁷.

- **Grounding MEL evidence in lived experience:** Communities affected by conflict, displacement, return, and peacebuilding are often best placed to explain whether an intervention is relevant, accessible, and producing intended or unintended effects. In GLOW's work with IDPs from ex-FATA and Swat, returnee families, Afghan refugees, women, youth, elders, teachers, service providers, and civil society actors, community perspectives have provided the most grounded understanding of programme realities.

¹⁴ GLOW Consultants is a Pakistan based research and MEL organisation that works with conflict-affected, displacement-affected, and fragile communities to generate locally grounded evidence for humanitarian and development actors.

¹⁵ FATA or Merged Districts as it is now known has involved decades of militancy, military operations, forced displacement, and returns, creating deep community mistrust of formal systems and a need for MEL approaches that prioritise safety, informal networks, and local validation.

¹⁶ Conflict in Swat reached its peak with the Taliban occupation in 2008–2009 followed by a major military operation, leaving communities with lasting experiences of displacement, securitisation, and repeated consultations that rarely translated into meaningful programme change.

¹⁷ This reflects Primer 1's recognition that 'external evaluators may have biases or gaps in understanding which need to be addressed by including stakeholders with different world views and perspectives.' See Primer 1, 'Understanding Participation in MEL' section.

- **Identifying who is missed or wrongly included:** Participation helps reduce inclusion and exclusion errors in targeting, especially where official data, beneficiary lists, or formal reporting systems do not fully capture vulnerability. In displacement and return settings, vulnerability can change quickly as families lose documentation, move repeatedly, stay with relatives, or avoid registration due to fear, insecurity, stigma, or mistrust.
- **Understanding power, protection, and context:** Communities often know which households are genuinely vulnerable, which groups are invisible, which gatekeepers control access, and which voices are being silenced. In conservative or security-sensitive contexts, surveys alone may miss women's protection concerns, girls' education barriers, youth grievances, or trust issues. Participation helps MEL teams understand not only whether an intervention worked, but why, for whom, under what conditions, and with what unintended effects.

How Can Participation be Supported in Ways that are not Tokenistic or Extractive?

Based on GLOW's experience, non-extractive participation requires investment in relationships before tools.

- **Completing the feedback loop:** Communities should be informed about what happened to their input: what was heard, how it was used, what changed, and what could not be changed¹⁸. This helps reduce consultation fatigue and mistrust, and shows that community voices do not simply disappear into donor reports or dashboards.
- **Conflict sensitivity and do no harm:** Participation must be designed around who can speak safely, who may face risks, who is usually excluded, and who may be punished for sharing views¹⁹. In areas affected by militancy, displacement, or non-state actors, participation may need to be quiet, indirect, gender-sensitive, and mediated through trusted relationships.
- **Safe participation of women and girls:** MEL systems should invest in female facilitators, appropriate venues, separate spaces, safe timings, and trusted

¹⁸ Completing the feedback loop reflects Primer 1's emphasis on showing 'how community input influenced interpretations, recommendations, or decisions.' See Primer 1, 'Introducing Participation Across the Evaluation Process' section.

¹⁹ This reflects Primer 2's discussion of participation vs protection, noting that 'there may be limits to what can be said, who can be involved, or how openly disagreement can be expressed in fragile or politically sensitive contexts.' See Primer 2, 'Common Dilemmas and Trade-offs' section.

female intermediaries, including women-led organisations, female health workers, teachers, or community volunteers.

- **Local researchers as analysis partners:** Local researchers and facilitators understand language, silence, hesitation, humour, coded expressions, hierarchy, and local risk²⁰. Their insights help prevent misreading responses or overlooking sensitive findings.

What Does a Participatory Partnership for ODA Look Like?

Based on GLOW's experience, participatory ODA partnerships should move from "consulting communities" to "learning with communities."²¹

- **Recognising local actors as knowledge partners:** Communities, local researchers, civil society, frontline workers, informal institutions, and affected groups should be treated as interpreters of context and co-producers of learning, not only as sources of data.
- **Defining meaningful change locally:** Communities should help shape MEL questions and define what change means. In IDP, return, and refugee-hosting contexts, recovery may mean safety, dignity, livelihoods, schooling, documentation, freedom of movement, legal identity, protection from harassment, access to services, and trust in institutions.
- **Improving targeting and accountability:** Communities can help identify vulnerability, validate beneficiary lists, and create safe appeal and correction channels. This must avoid elite capture, retaliation, or public exposure of vulnerable households.
- **Creating space for honest evidence:** Donors and international actors should value reporting that includes what went wrong, who was excluded, where trust was weak, and what needs adaptation²². This produces better evidence, reduces

²⁰ This reflects Primer 1's emphasis that 'involving community members in the interpretation of data strengthens both the quality and the legitimacy of an evaluation.' See Primer 1, 'Practical Guidance' section.

²¹ This shift reflects Primer 2's distinction between tokenistic and meaningful involvement, noting that 'being included in a partnership does not necessarily mean having the ability to shape it.' See Primer 2, 'Common Dilemmas and Trade-offs' section.

²² This reflects both Primer 1's emphasis on documenting 'what could not change due to institutional constraints' and Primer 2's recognition that 'decisions about priorities, methods, or interpretations of findings can be shaped more by external expectations than by local needs.' See Primer 1, 'What to Document for Transparency and Accountability' section and Primer 2, 'Common Dilemmas and Trade-offs' section.

harm, strengthens accountability, and supports more realistic, locally legitimate programming.

Takeaways for Evaluators

Challenge	Recommendation
Consultation fatigue	Complete feedback loops; show how community input changed decisions, for example by connecting design modification and midcourse correction with the community feedback and communicating it back to the community through the feedback loop
Risk of harm to respondents	Use quiet, indirect, gender-sensitive participation methods
Exclusion of women	Invest in female facilitators, separate spaces, trusted intermediaries
Donor bias toward positive reporting	Create space for negative findings as learning opportunities

Key Messages:

1. Complete feedback loops.
2. Invest in relationship-building.
3. Ensure conflict sensitivity.
4. Report on the full range of success and failures.

Everyday Peace Indicators: Grounded Accountability Model



Authors: Eduardo Gonzalez, Shruthi De Visser and Omar Salem

In conflict-affected settings, participatory Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) is both more difficult and more necessary. Violent conflict damages trust within communities and between communities and outsiders; creates fear around what can safely be said; and can make participation vulnerable to elite capture, security constraints, and donor-driven timelines. These challenges mean that participation may remain superficially consultative rather than genuinely collaborative. Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) and the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM) respond to these constraints by applying a methodology which first finds meaningful local signs of change, validating those indicators with communities, and returning findings in ways that strengthen accountability.

Participatory Language

The active participation of communities in MEL in situations of conflict keeps programs honest and experts humble. Regular members of a community do not describe change in technical language, using standardized concepts that have been developed for the convenience of donors and policymakers' analysis. On the contrary, through microhistories, everyday observations, and inductive thinking, they produce the evidence that programs tend to present in technical and exclusionary language²³. In Sudan, Yemen and Burundi, people may not speak about "social cohesion," "institutional legitimacy," or "logical frameworks." But they know whether they feel safer moving through their neighbourhoods. They know whether leaders listen. They know whether young people feel respected, whether women can speak without fear, whether rumours are becoming less dangerous, and whether people from different groups can ask each other for help. Those are the seemingly modest but telling contributions to a shared conception of what peace would look like, even when it seems hard to grasp in the challenging circumstances of daily life.

²³ This reflects Primer 1's critique that '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.' See Primer 1, 'Introduction and Guiding Questions' section.

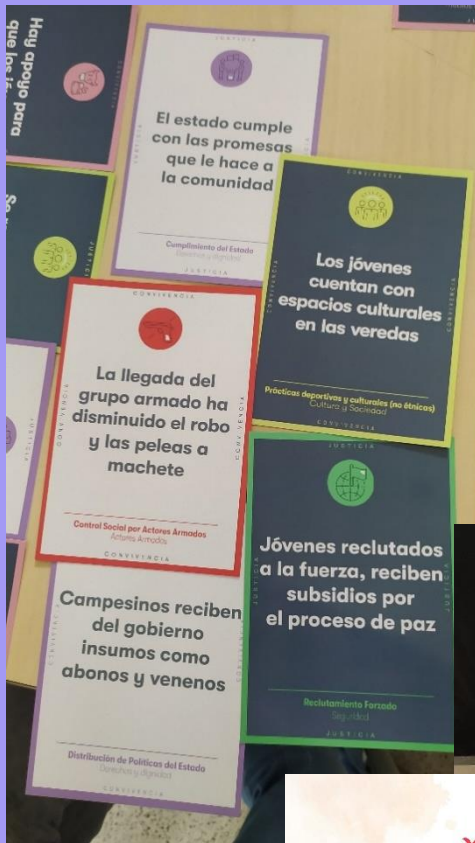
Ranges of Participation

Participation can be practiced in a wide spectrum that goes from superficial inclusion to more demanding forms of involvement including co-creation and genuine community ownership. Practitioner observations suggest that many participatory MEL approaches remain closer to consultation than co-ownership, particularly where indicators, timelines, and evaluation questions are set before communities are meaningfully engaged. Participation should not mean being invited to confirm decisions that have already been made or be used as a token that legitimizes a MEL process. It should mean:

1. co-defining the questions, the indicators, the interpretation of findings, and the choices that follow;
2. understanding how information will be used, what risks are involved, and what will change because people participated.

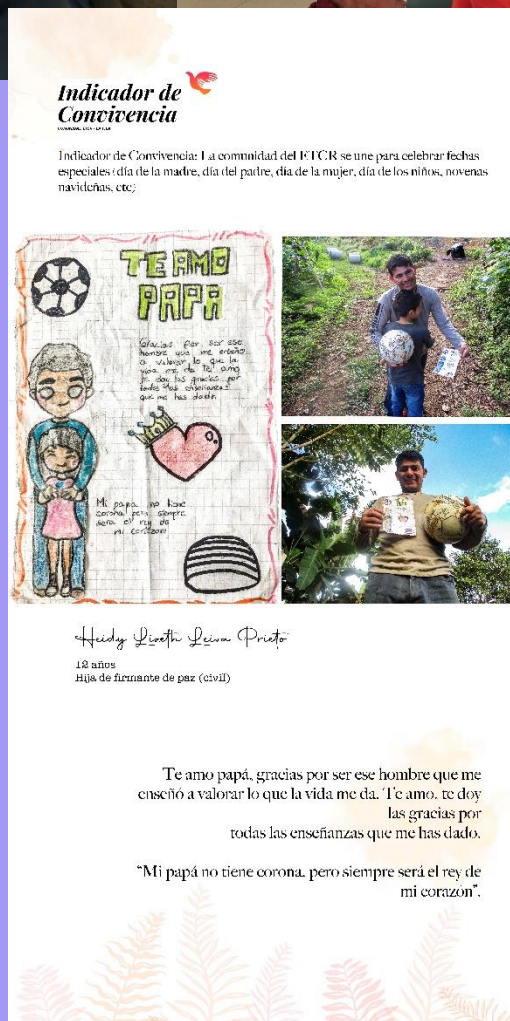
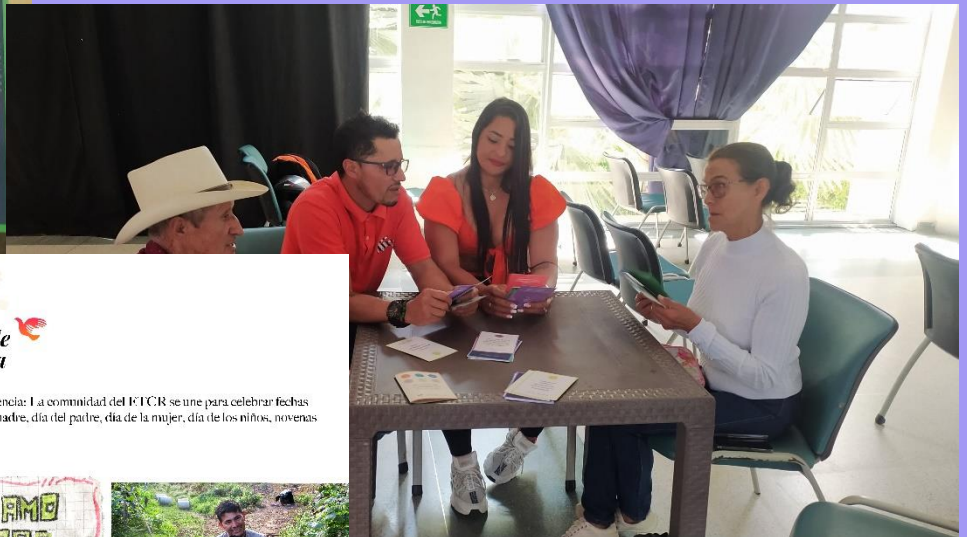
In Colombia, we recently provided communities with the findings of EPI analysis conducted in their territories and the most common response was surprise that we had returned to the community and engaged them with our findings, because they have become accustomed to extractive MEL interventions²⁴. In our work, we commonly return with creative ways of giving data back to communities to give participants the opportunity to use their own data for action and advocacy. Two examples are the use of card games and Photovoice. We print out cards representing the key indicators co-created with the community and use them to show our findings and encourage the community members to find correlations among them. Photovoice is a participatory artistic methodology by which community members make photographs of their daily life inspired in the indicators they consider relevant and translatable into visual language.

²⁴ This connects to Primer 2's discussion of tokenism, where 'being included in a partnership does not necessarily mean having the ability to shape it.' Returning findings to communities is one practical way of moving beyond this. See Primer 2, 'Common Dilemmas and Trade-offs' section.



Playing cards used in a 2023 giving data exercise.

Participants in a card game using indicators co-created in the community.



A card showing a Photocollage proposed by former combatants as an indicator of coexistence: “The community celebrates Father’s Day, Mother’s Day and other significant dates.”

Long-Term Outcomes of Participatory MEL

An important emergent outcome of participatory MEL with peace and conflict-affected communities is a potential contribution to reconciliation. In Sri Lanka, the application of the EPI methodology resulted in an evolving conversation that refined initial indicators based on prejudice against other ethnoreligious groups, toward others based on common responsibility. In Colombia, we have observed that the relationship between victimised communities and former combatants experience a similar evolution, as communities go from grievance represented in indicators of acts of violence to indicators which focus on conditions for restorative justice and reconciliation.

More work is needed to know whether participatory MEL can be itself a reconciliation intervention. But we have found in our work that when MEL is genuinely participatory, reconciliation-relevant outcomes can emerge through the process: communities clarify what change means, challenge inherited assumptions, and see their own definitions of peace, safety, dignity, or repair reflected back to them.

MEL teams which are genuinely committed to participatory, non-tokenistic, non-extractive MEL in conflict-affected communities, need to envision a delicate balance between responsibility for programming, taking account of security, and capacity to surrender control by taking seriously local leadership and conceptions. Meaningful participatory MEL means that communities will see the indicators they have created, resulting in ownership, self-recognition and pride that no externally designed program can manufacture by itself²⁵. Practical ways of implementing these principles include:

- Budgeting for trust-building activities with leadership in the community, as a necessary phase before reception of data.
- Budgeting resources for meaningful return of the information to the communities before they are finalised.
- Allowing participatory baseline work before indicators are fixed.
- Supporting local facilitators who understand the conflict dynamics.
- Compensating community members' time where appropriate²⁶.
- Creating safe spaces for participation beyond local elites and power holders.

²⁵ This reflects Primer 1's principle of shared ownership, which notes that findings carry greater weight 'since they are not imposed from outside but emerge from a collective and participatory process.' See Primer 1, 'Principles of Participatory MEL' section.

²⁶ This responds to Primer 2's concern that local partners 'might take on significant roles in data collection, coordination, or community engagement, sometimes without recognition or appropriate compensation.' See Primer 2, 'Common Dilemmas and Trade-offs' section.

- Engaging communities with their data in creative ways that are consistent with local forms of sharing knowledge and can be engaging, including games, photovoice, song and poems.

In our experience, these practices also lead to more sustainable outcomes. Long-term change is unlikely unless communities themselves have ownership over what reconciliation means and what they believe is needed to build it. Participatory MEL does not only measure change: it can help communities begin to make it.

Key Messages:

1. Prioritise community led indicators.
2. Budget for trust-building and data exchange with communities.
3. Be attentive to emergent signs that participatory MEL encourages reconciliation.

Core Considerations from the Perspective of Peace and Conflict-Affected Communities

This primer has sought to contribute to conversations on participatory MEL by creating a space for those working and living in peace and conflict-affected contexts to directly share and frame their insights for policy and practice.



Figure 3: What good participation looks like in peace and conflict-affected contexts

Across all the contributions, some practical lessons emerge for those designing, commissioning, and implementing MEL in fragile and conflict-affected settings (see figure 3). These include:

- **Design participation beyond data collection:** involve communities not only as a source of evidence, but as partners in shaping learning questions, interpreting findings, and informing decisions.
- **Invest in equitable partnerships:** build relationships based on trust, accountability, transparency and responsiveness, recognising that meaningful participation requires time and sustained engagement.
- **Recognise communities as knowledge partners:** consider people living in conflict-affected communities as experts in their own contexts whose perspectives strengthen the quality, relevance, and legitimacy of MEL.
- **Prioritise context-sensitive and ethical approaches:** adapt MEL processes to local realities, power dynamics, and conflict sensitivities to produce learning that is both responsible and actionable.

- **Create opportunities for early and continuous participation:** engage from the earliest stages of programme and evaluation design, rather than consulting communities only during implementation or data collection.
- **Consider the transformational potential of participatory MEL as an opportunity for change even beyond measurement:** well-designed participatory processes not only generate evidence but can also contribute to change during the process itself.

Though these recommendations involve important contextual considerations, they also reveal principles shared across the contributions presented in this primer. The process of soliciting and developing contributions, while by no means textbook perfect, was guided by an overarching goal of fostering a space for co-creation, co-production, and co-publication. These objectives align closely with participatory practices, including within the MEL context. While it may seem obvious, creating clear and direct opportunities for participation and engagement is one of the most effective ways to both share and receive direct insights from those whose experiences MEL processes seek to understand. We therefore invite policymakers and MEL practitioners not only to reflect on the contributions included in this primer, but also to consider how similar approaches might become more prevalent in future programming that seeks to strengthen participation and participatory practice.

Further Resources

1. Ortega, D. and Vargas, O. et al. 2025. “Desmontar el estigma. La paz cotidiana en el Sumapaz.”

<https://everydaypeaceindicators.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Desmontar-el-estigma-Sumapaz.pdf>

2. Resource for Integrating Community Voices into a Research Study: Community Advisory Board Toolkit

https://sc-ctsi.org/uploads/resources/CommunityAdvisoryBoard_Toolkit.pdf

3. The Power of Community Voice: Creating Effective Advisory Boards

<https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/power-community-voice>

4. Strategies To Center Community Voices In Research

<https://www.irp.wisc.edu/strategies-to-center-community-voices-in-research/>

5. Co-authorship with Community Partners as Research Co-creation

<https://esj.usask.ca/index.php/esj/article/view/70805>

6. ‘They Do Ask, But it is not the Way you Ask’: Data Collection as Communication for Internally Displaced Persons in South Sudan

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2026.2678959>

7. The Power in Re-Telling Research: A Cambodian Community-Based Approach Generating Knowledge by Subjects of Study

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2025.2463913>

8. How to Involve the Public as Co-Authors

https://healthinnovation-em.org.uk/images/resource-hub/PPI%20documents/How%20to%20guidance/How_to_involve_people_as_co-authors.pdf

9. The Co-Production of Research between Academics, NGOs and Communities in Humanitarian Response: A Practice Guide

https://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4660547/1/Lokot_Wake_2021_Co-production_Practice_Guide.pdf

10. “Co-Investigators but with Different Power”: Local Voices on the Localization of Humanitarian Research

<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/co-investigators-different-power-local-voices-localization-humanitarian-research>

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<https://statelessnessandcitizenshipreview.com/index.php/journal/article/download/723/435>

Pratley, E. M. L. (2026). *Hungry for peace: Food peacebuilding in an entangled world*. Edinburgh University Press.