Participatory Evaluation
As with the rest of this Handbook, this chapter does not purport to provide a complete guide on how to carry out the relevant tasks, in this case evaluations; its aim is to provide guidance on aspects of evaluation practice as they relate to participation. There is a great deal of guidance on good practice in evaluation elsewhere, and this chapter assumes that the evaluator and the evaluation manager will be designing, managing and carrying out the evaluation in accordance with good practice.

Participatory evaluation is defined as an evaluation in which stakeholders involved in the project, from project team members to members of the concerned population, have an opportunity to provide feedback on the project and, if appropriate, to influence its development and/or future projects. Beyond this, it also assesses how stakeholders have been involved in the project and how the participatory approach has been implemented.

The amount of extra time and effort required to carry out an evaluation in a participatory manner should not be underestimated. There is a risk of unrealistic expectations both within the agency and among the population about how much participation will really be possible, given the constraints of time and resources and the purpose of the evaluation. This chapter assumes that a fairly complete type of participation is being implemented. However, even limited participation and consultation can be valuable as long as there is transparency about these limits. Also, it is still possible to consider an evaluation to be participatory even if the affected population is not involved at every stage.

While it is not essential to have used participatory methods during earlier phases of the project, having done so will significantly increase the possibilities of the participatory evaluation. If participatory methods have not been used in earlier phases, this should not preclude participation during the evaluation, but it will limit its effectiveness.

While this Handbook assumes that the reader wants to use participatory methods, other approaches and methods may be more effective depending on the objectives of the evaluation and the context. In the context of an ongoing conflict, a critical weakness of a participatory evaluation is that even ‘private’ participation can compromise the safety of those who participate. Issues like these should determine which overall evaluation method is chosen and the degree of participation that this involves.

The evaluation of impact is both hard to define and hard to achieve. It requires a specific methodology. However, the participation of the affected population in an evaluation is also a very useful way to assess a project’s impact. Participation is a way of gathering a diversity of views, helping to triangulate both quantitative data collected by other means, and to ground qualitative assessments in local realities. This does not achieve objectivity on its own, but can contribute to it.

Lessons can be learnt from the project itself, and also from the participatory approach that is adopted. The participation of the affected population in an evaluation and the incorporation of their opinions and concerns is central to assessing whether the project has had a positive impact for population members. Participation is also a way of ensuring that a diversity of views is considered and contributes to making the evaluation more objective and impartial. What is more, the results of a participatory evaluation tend to be more grounded in field realities.

It is important to ensure high levels of transparency in evaluation processes, from the drafting of the Terms of Reference’ (TOR), to discussing conclusions and recom-
mendations. Effective communication is one of the main methods for achieving transparency, and for promoting ‘bottom-up’ as opposed to ‘top-down’ dynamics.

Participatory evaluation entails:

- **listening** to all parties in order to improve objectivity
- **focusing on triangulation** (cross-checking) and **validating information**
- **ensuring the transparency** of the process
- **informing everyone involved** when planning your evaluation, and communicating your objectives and results
- **ensuring that the conclusions and recommendations** of your evaluation will have a **visible impact** on the project. If this is not the case, the risk is that people may feel betrayed.
- **recruiting evaluators** who have the necessary communication skills, are trained in participatory techniques, and are objective.

Participation in an evaluation has much less meaning if the population or local actors have not been involved in the assessment, design and implementation and monitoring phases.

Evaluation processes can vary. The step-by-step process proposed in this chapter should help you include participatory techniques in your own evaluation methods.

Different perceptions and different ideas and beliefs about the purpose of evaluations can make people very suspicious or wary of evaluations. A participatory evaluation, if carried out carefully, can often allay people’s concerns and ensure that it is a valuable learning process.

In order to reduce the risk of frustration and misunderstandings, it is important to present the Terms of Reference and the principles behind the evaluation to the population.

A participatory approach can be used for all types of evaluation, regardless of the level and type of stakeholder involvement.

Participation in the evaluation depends strongly on:

- how the decision to carry out an evaluation was taken
- who commissioned the evaluation
- who carries out the evaluation
- the project cycle phase the project is currently in
- where the project is being implemented
- how the crisis is affecting the project
X.1.1 What prompted the evaluation, who took the decision and who will carry it out?

Ideally, an evaluation should be planned during the project design phase and the affected people should be involved in deciding when and where data will be gathered. However, these conditions are rarely met. An evaluation might be carried out because monitoring has revealed a specific area that requires more detailed analysis or it might be requested by the affected population, local or international stakeholders, donors or agency headquarters who wish a certain area to be evaluated.

### Security and Protection

The evaluation process may arouse suspicion among external parties, particularly if they are involved in some way in the crisis. If people are well-informed about evaluation objectives and sectors under evaluation, misunderstandings are less likely to arise.

An evaluation can highlight problems related to mismanagement, abuse, as well as errors in the initial design or difficulties that were not taken into account. Decisions have to be made and actions taken that may endanger those who detected the problem or those who were responsible for it.

In some contexts, meeting and talking with affected populations places them at risk. Discussions, especially individual interviews, may be seen as an occasion for handing over ‘strategic’ information.

Evaluations may be seen as ‘sanctions’ and as a threat to employees and other people involved in the project.

Your principles and your mission can place you at risk as an evaluator, for example, if your mission involves convincing people to bear witness of human rights violations.

### Humanitarian Principles

Some groups may wish to manipulate the process in their interest and make recommendations that benefit them at the expense of other groups.

If the evaluation has been commissioned by an external agency, be ready to provide information about their mandate, mission and strategic goals.

Participation in an evaluation is especially useful when people understand the benefits for the affected population.

Whether it is an internal, external or joint team of evaluators, it is important that they are perceived to be ‘independent’, i.e. as a separate entity from the project team.

Find out what people’s perceptions are of the commissioning agency and whether this presents any specific security or protection issues in this context. You need to ensure that you do not place informants, aid workers and/or evaluators at risk.

If the evaluation is likely to touch upon sensitive issues such as mismanagement, corruption, loss of assets or other problems related to resources management, be careful not to be ‘over communicative’, or to be perceived as ‘looking for the guilty party’.

The reason for carrying out an evaluation may be related to the crisis (e.g. security concerns, new vulnerable groups) or to the demands of a specific population (e.g. complaints about targeting procedures, products and services being misused or exchanged). Be careful when you communicate this information, that you are not compromising people’s safety.

Evaluators are often mistaken for ‘other INGOs’, raising the population’s expectations. Be ready to communicate to the affected population that the evaluators will not directly provide any new projects, products or services.

Be sure that you use the correct translation of ‘evaluator’ in local languages. In some circumstances, the term evaluator may carry another hidden meaning, such as ‘investigator’ or ‘intelligence agent’.

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**Tips & Warnings**

- If the evaluation has been commissioned by an external agency, be ready to provide information about their mandate, mission and strategic goals.
- Participation in an evaluation is especially useful when people understand the benefits for the affected population.
- Whether it is an internal, external or joint team of evaluators, it is important that they are perceived to be ‘independent’, i.e. as a separate entity from the project team.
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- Evaluators are often mistaken for ‘other INGOs’, raising the population’s expectations. Be ready to communicate to the affected population that the evaluators will not directly provide any new projects, products or services.
- Be sure that you use the correct translation of ‘evaluator’ in local languages. In some circumstances, the term evaluator may carry another hidden meaning, such as ‘investigator’ or ‘intelligence agent’.
In all of these cases, the reasons for carrying out the evaluation should be communicated to the affected population. The greater the degree of transparency, the more willing they will be to participate.

Evaluations can be carried out by an external group of evaluators, a team of stakeholders or joint teams. The evaluators are not necessarily employees of the commissioning agency. An important issue at this stage is to clarify who is who, and who will be conducting meetings and focus groups ‘in the field’.

**Why launch an evaluation now?**
The time when the evaluation takes place will affect both:
- the motivation of population members to participate.
- their availability to take part.
Communication about the pertinence of the evaluation and the reason why it is carried out at a particular time is of key importance in motivating people.

**X.1.2 Drawing up Terms of Reference (ToR)**
Involving the population in drawing up the ToR can encourage their involvement in the evaluation and increase their sense of ownership of the results.

**Defining the objectives of the evaluation**
It is fundamental to define the evaluation objectives collectively with the affected population. Possible objectives include:
- to assess the programme’s relevance from the perspective of the affected population and to gauge whether needs have changed or not
- to identify the effects of the intervention on a specific set of problems
- to evaluate the programme’s impact
- to adapt the intervention to the current situation
- to compare how activities have evolved in relation to the initial action plan
- to initiate a learning process, aimed at preventing errors from being repeated
- to assess the population’s level of satisfaction

Evaluation objectives should respond to specific needs, should be perceived as useful and/or necessary for the programme and, if possible, should be related to specific benefits to the population.

It should be made clear from the outset that the evaluation does not seek to apply sanctions. In this way, you can encourage participation and develop a process based on trust and empathy.

**Working with partner organisations**
Establishing a partnership in order to carry out an evaluation requires time and implies shared responsibility for the evaluation. At the same time, evaluations of this kind tend to be richer and can provide an overall view of the situation that goes beyond the project scope and limits.

It is very important to clarify each stakeholder’s role and field of responsibility, and to ensure that they have the capacity (e.g. resources, time, know-how) to fulfil these commitments. If you intend to establish a partnership to carry out the evaluation, you will find some advice in Chapter 6: Making partnerships work. You may have to draw up a contract and clarify each party’s commitments, especially in terms of communication, who is responsible for the evaluation results and other issues such as confidentiality, independence, etc.
Defining evaluation criteria and indicators

Quality criteria are principles or standards that are used to assess the quality of a project. Indicators are variables used to measure whether quality criteria have been met according to specific thresholds.

Involving stakeholders (primary stakeholders and/or partners) in designing the evaluation criteria and indicators will enhance their motivation and facilitate the process of adapting indicators to the local culture and capacities.

If evaluation criteria and/or indicators differ from the project quality criteria, it may be useful to assess in what way they are complementary before engaging in the evaluation.

If stakeholders were involved in the design phase, they will already have participated in designing project objectives, quality criteria and indicators (see Chapter 9 Designing a participatory monitoring system).

If participation is one criterion or objective of the project, it must be evaluated as such (see Review of participation sections at the end of each project cycle phase).

The profile of the evaluation team

An evaluation is generally a fairly brief intervention (in relation to the project itself) and as such the personal skills, image, attitude and objectivity of those conducting the evaluation are key factors in rapidly establishing a relationship based on empathy and understanding.

Defining the methods for gathering and analysing data

Methods for gathering information can be defined with the participation of the population. This can add a further dimension to the evaluation process and the recommendations which are produced and can increase the population’s ownership of the evaluation results.

Communicating and validating the Terms of Reference

To stakeholders

Once the ToR are complete, it is useful to present them to the stakeholders. This will allow everyone to publicly validate the responsibilities of the different parties, the objectives and expected results of the evaluation and the resources required by the team.

To the affected population

You can present the ToR to representatives of the affected population during a traditional assemblies, workshops or focus groups. When the evaluation covers a large region, it is important to validate the ToR in each area that you visit.

Potential partners include traditional assemblies and local institutions. It may be useful to ask the population to identify existing collective problems solving mechanisms, providing they are culturally and socially accepted, and to try to work with them.

Given that an evaluation is a complex multi-stakeholder exercise, formal procedures are important. For example, a steering committee, composed of representatives from the various stakeholders, can be very useful.

It is very important to identify the most appropriate partners for the evaluation. Being in charge of or involved in an evaluation can be a source of power. To ensure objectivity, organisations that are perceived as non-representative or have an inappropriate history must be avoided. If one organisation is unable to gain access to a key population group (women and other ethnic groups, for instance), it may be possible to work with several organisations to ensure that a representative sample of the population is consulted.

Take care to avoid the risk of being manipulated or instrumentalised by actors with a hidden agenda or by actors involved in the crisis, especially in armed conflicts.

It is essential to ensure that once you have initiated a participatory approach, traditional assemblies and local institutions continue to be involved in feedback exercises throughout the evaluation process.

Example

Goal Team Consult (GOTEC), a Congolese organisation, was asked to evaluate the socio-economic impact of the reconstruction of the Sake–Masisi trunk road and other interventions in favour of populations of this region, undertaken by German Agro Action (GAA).

Focus groups and interviews (using a questionnaire) were among the various methods used in the evaluation. The people who asked to attend the focus groups were ‘people who had a certain influence in community leadership, such as development committee members, traditional authorities and political-administrative authorities, teachers, nurses, health centre workers and church ministers.’

If you carry out a participatory evaluation, you have to be ready to measure the programme against criteria and indicators put forward by the population and local actors. They will not necessarily fit neatly with criteria and indicators set by the donor or agency headquarters, or with internationally recognised standards, but may reflect more adequately local realities and priorities.

You may need to explain the terms ‘quality criteria’ and ‘indicator.’ If so, make sure your explanation is clear and simple.

Try to “translate” the meaning of the criteria put forward by donors or headquarters, bearing in mind they may have to be adopted or revised to match the views of stakeholders involved in the participatory process.
When composing your evaluation team, it is important to pay attention to the sensitive issues related to accessing different population groups (notably male and female roles) and local customs.

Try to get an insider-outsider balance when composing your team. For example, you can recruit:
- a local evaluator, who knows the region, understands the conflict and how it has affected the population and who will engage with the population with the necessary sensitivity;
- an external evaluator, with a global vision and previous experience in other contexts.

Depending on your evaluation objectives, the evaluation team can also include population representatives selected by members of the population. The legitimacy of these representatives is essential to ensure that the evaluation process and its results are accepted by the population. The potential disadvantage of this approach is that population representatives may be reluctant to raise problems that are specific to a given group, but this can be overcome by involving several stakeholders.

At least one member of the evaluation team must speak the local language and dialects fluently to ensure subtleties and nuances are truly captured.

When working with a translator, make sure that s/he also has some understanding of participatory methods.

The distinction between the evaluation team and the project team should be explained to the population. This is important to ensure they are comfortable pointing out project weaknesses with the evaluation team.

Try to ensure that the team composition does not automatically exclude certain population groups or raise the likelihood that some minorities will not be heard. In conflict zones in particular, there is a risk that evaluators will be perceived as biased or at least not entirely neutral (because of their nationality or profile).

Remember that "too much information kills information": try to identify which information is essential to collect and what are the most suitable means of collecting this information, in relation to your time and resource constraints. Discussing this with participants can help identify original ways of focusing on and obtaining essential information.

Local stakeholders can help you determine what is feasible and adequate, in line with the budget and time you have available. Furthermore, they may be able to contribute resources and time to facilitate the process, for example by proposing venues for discussions with population members, organising feedback sessions, providing access to certain groups, etc.

Do not forget to budget and plan for the activities that take place before and after participatory exercises, such as contacting populations before the meeting, confirming the meeting, planning a meeting to present results, etc.

### Gathering and analysing data

#### Getting going
Before starting the evaluation, questions to be raised include:

- Are partners prepared and do they fully understand their role in the process?
- Do all the team members understand the ethical issues involved in the evaluation, as well as the importance of confidentiality and avoiding taboo subjects?
- Has the population been informed about the evaluation, where it will take place and why?
- Has the population expressed any expectations or concerns regarding evaluation outputs and how can the evaluation team take these into consideration?

#### Gathering data
At this point, we strongly recommend that you re-read Chapter 4 (Communication techniques) and Chapter 5 (Making partnerships work). However, below are some of the key points related specifically to evaluation.

Be prepared to introduce yourself and go over the ToR with the population every time you are in a new group. Make sure that the population knows who you are and what you are doing here. Remind them of your role and that it differs from the project team.
Triangulation as a rule
Remember that the aim is both to gather opinions and also to achieve a reasonably objective view. Therefore it is essential, when gathering data to:

• triangulate facts, opinions and rumours, that is, verify what you hear by checking it with more than one source
• provide evidence for findings or statements.

Participatory data analysis
Data analysis is rarely done in a participatory way. The evaluation team is often left to collate the information it gathers and to analyse it by itself. Participatory analysis can help provide multiple views and analysis of the same information. It also supports ownership by relevant stakeholders of the evaluation results and recommendations.

Data analysis often starts when gathering data, especially when doing participatory exercises, as participants are likely to express their views and analysis. But data analysis continues throughout the evaluation process, as new information and opinions are gathered, until the final report is written and disseminated.

Continuously review the methods used
Methodological choices made when defining the Terms of Reference may prove inadequate when putting them into practice. You may find, for example, that you are not accessing the right groups, or that some of the analysis is biased, preventing you from obtaining comprehensive and reliable information.

Despite time constraints, it is important to regularly take a step back and see the overall picture during the data gathering and analysis process. Ask yourself the following questions:

• Are the methods being used effective? (e.g. are participants really being able to express their opinions?)
• Is the composition of focus groups and assemblies appropriate to address important issues and ensure participants are really involved?
• How can we revise our methods in accordance with the above observations?

X.1.4 Validating and communicating results
During an evaluation, there can be a particular focus on extracting information: the population is consulted and their opinions regarding programme quality and relevance are recorded. The evaluation team then withdraws to prepare the report and often very little feedback is subsequently given.

Participatory evaluation is time-consuming. The population is unlikely to commit itself to the evaluation process unless information is readily accessible, data is relevant and consistent, and they receive proper feedback on the results.

Tips & Warnings
Make sure that, where possible, meetings and/or workshops are organised in advance and that the necessary materials are available.

To a large extent, translators and local staff will determine the quality of your relationship with local assemblies. Their personality, the way they are perceived by the community, and their ability to create empathy will significantly affect the quality of dialogue.

You do not necessarily have to conduct the evaluation workshops yourself! Set aside times when you can remove yourself from the group to observe and listen. This is often very useful as you are less likely to influence the content of the discussion. However, be careful that participants are fairly represented.

During workshops, interviews, focus groups or other types of meeting, bear in mind ethical issues, particularly the question of confidentiality and anonymity.

When collecting information via group sessions, you can analyze the information that is being gathered with the group (e.g. analysis of a map that is collectively drawn).

You can support analytical discussions by asking questions such as, “Why do you think this happened?” and “How did this occur?”. However, participants must also feel free to express their point of view as they wish.

You can play with group size: e.g. small groups can present their evaluation of specific issues for discussion before a larger assembly.

It may be useful to organise participants into small groups and ask them to present their observations regarding specific issues.

Take care to differentiate between fact, opinion and rumour. Try to validate the facts, justify the opinions and understand the rumours.

Try to discuss preliminary findings with key stakeholders as the evaluation progresses. This is also an opportunity to ask them whether they are satisfied with your methods.
Communicating evaluation results and recommendations can take place in three stages:

1. **Informally validating the results**
   Validating results is particularly important if you intend to quote comments made by participants to support evaluation results.

2. **Writing the report**
   One of the difficulties arising from participatory approaches involves analysing and presenting the data in such a way that the wealth of perspectives and involvement of different stakeholders is not lost in the final report. Too often, one person, or at most, a few people are responsible for the almost impossible task of synthesising the mass of raw data and presenting it in a report.

   Report writing can be done in collaboration with key stakeholders and population representatives. This exercise can lead to highly stimulating debate, and innovative ideas and recommendations.

3. **Formally communicating results**
   Formally presenting the results of the evaluation to the population is just as important as consulting them. This is your opportunity to give the population feedback on what has been done and how. In this way, you can defuse any rumours that may have arisen during the information gathering process. Presenting your observations in public also gives you the opportunity to express your own opinions about the project.

   In addition to making a formal presentation, make sure the report is disseminated to the relevant persons and institutions, and in the appropriate language.
1. Prioritising recommendations
Key local partners should be involved in deciding which recommendations are the most important as their opinions may differ from those of the agency. Representatives of the affected population can also provide insight into how certain recommendations can be put into practice. Involving the local population is a good way to ensure there is transparency and communication about which recommendations have been retained and why.

2. Implementing recommendations
Again, involving population representatives in the process can enhance collaboration, ownership and communication.

Whereas aid workers come and go, population members remain and witness the same errors being made again and again. To learn lessons and change a project accordingly is to show respect for the affected population, and is extremely important in building an organisation’s legitimacy and credibility.

Furthermore, an evaluation is a waste of time unless recommendations are implemented to improve the project. This is particularly important when population members have been involved in the evaluation, as this will have raised their expectations. An evaluation which only assesses compliance or is limited to information collection can be extremely frustrating for local stakeholders.

Implementing recommendations should involve the following steps:

1. reviewing the evaluation results to select and prioritise the recommendations that can be acted upon
2. defining mechanisms for putting these recommendations into practice

It is rare for these steps to be put into practice and even more so for it to be done in a participatory manner. Involving population members and local partners in this process can strengthen the relationship between the affected population and the aid organisation and can build programme ownership among population members.

It is important to review how participation has worked at each stage of the project cycle. The purpose of these periodic reviews is to reflect on your original motivation and objectives for using a participatory approach and to make any necessary adjustments in order to achieve these objectives.

**Who participated and how?**

The following table will help you to describe how the participatory assessment was conducted, by recording who participated and how for each step of the evaluation.
In addition to describing what has been done, it is essential to consider whether those who took part felt they were genuinely consulted, that they were able to express their concerns, that the appropriate environment was provided so that they could speak openly and that they were genuinely able to participate.

This can be assessed by consulting a small sample of those who participated in the assessment. This should preferably be done by someone who did not facilitate the process (as this would bias responses).

Was participation successful?

You might like to consider some of these questions:

- **Security and protection**: Was the security of evaluators, project team members, participants, other stakeholders, or other population members threatened as a result of the participatory evaluation process? What measures did you take to ensure this did not happen?

- **Impartiality and independence**: Were you able to respect the principles of independence and impartiality? Were you careful about whom you engaged with? Did you communicate about your principles?

- **Discrimination and marginalisation**: Were you able to gain access to minorities, hear unrepresented groups and work with them without stigmatising them further or creating security problems for them?

- **Did participation enable you to consult a variety of stakeholders and provide clear and objective evidence for the facts you presented in the evaluation report?**

- **Has participation increased the affected population’s ownership of recommendations and thereby facilitated the implementation of corrective measures?**

- **Has the evaluation had a negative impact on the security of those involved in the evaluation and/or project (e.g. by highlighting errors and abuses), and on the project (e.g. by highlighting failures and weaknesses)?**

- **Did participation allow you to take into account the key concerns of the affected population when defining the objectives and Terms of Reference of the evaluation?**

- **Did participation allow you to take into account the viewpoints of different population groups during the evaluation and to make relevant and comprehensive recommendations?**

- **Did local knowledge, expertise and resources help to achieve the objectives of the evaluation, notably by highlighting local opportunities or helping to identify and overcome constraints?**

- **Did participation reduce the risk of the evaluation process and recommendations being manipulated by stakeholders? Did the fact that you consulted a variety of groups allow you to remain objective and impartial?**

- **Do local people feel that they were sufficiently involved in the evaluation and sufficiently informed about its objectives, how it would be carried out and its results?**
• Does the population feel that the evaluation has taken their cultural, social and religious characteristics into account?

• Did participation allow you to identify and make use of existing information and resources for the evaluation (e.g. previously collected data) and therefore avoid undermining or duplicating activities?

• Did participation allow recommendations to be made that were coherent with other projects and activities, in particular the activities of the local population?

• Did participation promote ownership of the evaluation results by local networks and members of the population?

• Did participants’ feedback and input allow you to adapt the evaluation in a timely manner to developments in the context and/or crisis?

• Did participation allow you to identify and use local resources (e.g. expertise, time, local knowledge, experience, logistics, etc.) to carry out the evaluation?

• Did the use of local resources (e.g. expertise, time, local knowledge, experience, etc.) increase the efficiency of the evaluation, e.g. quantity and quality of information collected (and/or coverage) versus time and resources available?

• Have members of the population contributed to the lesson-learning process and the building of project memory to avoid the repetition of errors?

• Have members of the population been involved in the implementation of key recommendations?

• Did members of the population participate in the evaluation as much as you had planned?

• Did the participatory evaluation achieve its objectives? Why/why not?

• If objectives were not met with regard to participation, is this attributable to poor communication or ineffective management of the evaluation?

• What lessons have the evaluation team and the project team learned with regard to the participatory evaluation process?