



## Ensuring quality of evidence generated through participatory evaluation in humanitarian contexts

by Jessica Alexander and Francesca Bonino

### Introduction

Participatory evaluations are becoming ever more commonplace as a means of engaging with affected communities. As agencies move towards prioritising the input and feedback of those they hope to assist, these methods start featuring more prominently in how programmes are evaluated.

Nevertheless, questions often arise about the quality and credibility of evaluative evidence, such as whether evidence gathered using this type of evaluation approach is accurate and credible as opposed to just anecdotal. The [ALNAP Humanitarian Evaluation \(EHA\) Community of Practice \(CoP\)](#) has discussed this issue looking at questions such as:

- **Which tactics** have been used by evaluators to ensure the accuracy and representativeness<sup>1</sup> of data and analysis generated through participatory approaches?
- Do we find that the participatory nature of an evaluation leads to **unintended outcomes** (e.g. improved relationships with community members, greater project ownership, better insights into the intervention)?
- **Do the benefits** of using a participatory approach to evaluation **outweigh the risks** of inaccurate, non-representative and generally poor-quality evidence?

This short EHA method note presents insights from CoP members around these questions, introducing the benefits of participatory evaluations, methods and approaches.

### Defining participatory evaluation

Participatory evaluation has been described as a form of ‘collaborative inquiry’ (Cousins and Whitmore, 1998 and 2007; King, 2005); and as one type of ‘bottom-up’ evaluation approach (Patton, 2011: 187).

King defines it as

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition of these two concepts in the context of humanitarian action see Knox Clarke and Darcy, 2014: 15-16.

an overarching evaluation approach that involves programme staff or participants actively in decision making and other activities related to the planning and implementation of evaluation studies. The reasons for participant involvement, which vary among different types, include the desire to effect change in individuals, in programs, or organizations, and, in some cases, in society at large, as well as building the capacity of a group or an institution to conduct additional evaluations. (King, 2005: 291)

The literature considers a truly participatory evaluation to be one where the affected community is involved in all aspects of the evaluation: planning and design phases, gathering and analysing data, identifying findings and formulating recommendations, disseminating results and preparing a plan to improve programmes. Guijt and Gaventa (1998: 2) highlighted four principles that are at the core of participatory approaches to evaluation:

1. **'Participation'** – which means opening up the design of the evaluation process to include those most directly affected, and agreeing to analyse data together;
2. The inclusiveness of participatory monitoring and evaluation requires **'negotiation'** to reach agreement about what will be monitored or evaluated, how and when data will be collected and analysed, what the data actually means, and how findings will be shared, and action taken;
3. This leads to **'learning'** which becomes the basis for subsequent improvement and corrective action;
4. Since the number, role and skills of stakeholders, the external environment, and other factors change over time, **'flexibility'** is essential.

In practice, this means that participatory evaluations should not be just about asking respondents for answers to questions that an external evaluator or team has come up with, but – ideally – engaging communities in the design of the evaluation and the analysis of findings (for a review of all types of participatory evaluations, see Cullen and Coryn, 2011).

### What makes an evaluation participatory and what doesn't?

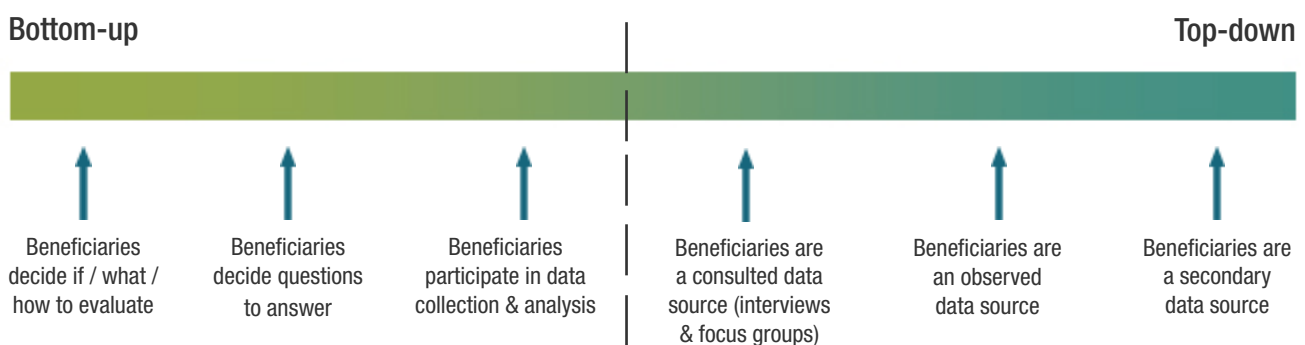
King (2005) highlights a common misconception about participatory evaluation, that simply involving programme staff, programme recipients, or programme participants in any way – most commonly collecting data from them – is by definition a 'participatory' evaluation. Mere contact between an evaluator and programme recipients / programme participants, he notes, is not sufficient. What makes an evaluation 'participatory' is the role that stakeholders including programme participants play and the degree of their involvement throughout the evaluation process on a range of issues that could include:

- what issues to study;
- what instruments to use;
- how to collect data and from whom;
- how to analyse the data;
- how evaluation results are shared / fed back to those who took part in the exercise.

Compared to other evaluation approaches, in a participatory evaluation the role of the evaluator is different: he or she works with the stakeholders only to identify the evaluation focus, the evaluation questions and data collection methods. However, the evaluator often retains responsibility for the execution and quality control of the evaluation process.

Training materials recently developed by the IFRC on Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting (see **figure 1** below) use a continuum to represent the different degrees of participation in evaluation. Participatory evaluation approaches are those on the bottom-up end of the spectrum where stakeholders – including first and foremost aid recipients and programme participants – exercise some decision-making power on i) whether to evaluate, ii) what should be evaluated (e.g. which specific aspect of programme, of an intervention etc.) and iii) how to go about doing it. EHA practice however, tends to gravitate towards the top-down side of the continuum (see Brown, Donini and Knox Clarke, 2014; and Donini and Brown, 2014).

**FIGURE 1: PARTICIPATORY CONTINUUM IN EVALUATION – AN EXAMPLE BY THE IFRC**



Source: IFRC-PED (2014)

## Benefits to participatory evaluation

In a recent volume discussing progress and application of participatory methods Jeremy Holland points out that ‘in contrast to the individualized observations and discussions in much top-down investigation, participatory research also focuses on public and collective reflection and action’ (Holland, 2013: 2). He and other researchers have argued that participatory methods can both generate accurate and generalisable statistics in a timely, efficient and effective way, while also empowering local people by using methods that facilitate local control of data generation and analysis. The assumption is that the stakeholders’ involvement helps ensure that the evaluation addresses appropriate issues and gives them a sense of ownership over the evaluation results.

It has been shown that stakeholder involvement also increases the chances of evaluation results being used by programme decision-makers and implementers (see for instance, Patton, 2007). In addition, the participatory approach constitutes a learning experience for the programme stakeholders, increasing their understanding of programme strategy, and contributing to improved communication between programme actors who are working at different levels of programme implementation (Aubel, 1999).

## Methods for participatory evaluation

Many participatory methods are derived from the development community where a host of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning for Action (PLA) tools have been tested and used for several decades now (see for instance, Gujit and Gaventa, 1998). Some of these include the use of 24-hour calendar, seasonal calendar, asset wheel, community resource mapping, Venn diagramming, ranking exercises, institutional perception mapping, mobility mapping, risk indexing or mapping, transect walking and wealth ranking.

An ACF evaluation of a farmers field school programme in Uganda (Foley, 2009) shows how different PRA / PLA tools can be used for primary data collection to: a) paint a qualitative picture of a programme in its contexts of implementation; and b) fill some gaps in and help with the interpretation and analysis of secondary data about the programme. In this example, the PRA tools were used sequentially as follows:

- a. **Wealth ranking** to understand perceptions of relative wealth and how they might have been reflected in programme targeting.
- b. **Seasonal calendar** to see production cycles and input needs and judge how well programming aligned.
- c. **Proportional piling** to investigate household food, income, and expenditure and suggest what types of changes might be expected from effective farmer field school programming.
- d. **Pairwise ranking** to explore relative severity of coping strategies and try to link these ideas with those about vulnerability and seasonality (Foley, 2009: 17).

Another example is featured in a recent IDS publication (Cornwall, 2014) which explains how a Venn Diagram method was used to map and analyse institutional and community relationships; and a card sorting exercise was used to identify, probe and validate trends in programme results and perceptions of programme participants (ibid: 10-13).<sup>2</sup>

## Ensuring accuracy of evidence from participatory evaluation methods

Some consider participatory evaluations to be less objective than standard evaluation techniques because the stakeholders involved have possible vested interests in the outcomes of the research. While this potential for bias is true in all evaluations, the degree to which stakeholders are involved in the actual evaluation itself may skew the findings to fit certain agendas. Thus, it is important to explore ways to ensure accuracy. As with any method, deriving quality information during an evaluation is critical to ensuring that programme decisions are based on credible evidence.

The section below highlights a few recommendations for improving the overall quality and robustness of evidence generated through participatory evaluations.

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<sup>2</sup> For additional resources see: a) a detailed overview and practical explanations on how to use several PRA tools including participatory visual methodologies and participatory and reflective practice tools are featured in a sourcebook compiled by Robert Chambers (2002); and b) the discussion by Kielmann, Cataldo and Seeley (2011) on how participatory tools are at the core of qualitative research (and evaluation) approaches.

## Conducting proper training

The methods used for participatory evaluations can be quite technical and require training and experience. If the evaluators do not have the proper capacity to conduct this kind of evaluation, the results can be skewed. As Holland writes in *Who Counts? The Power of Participatory Statistics*,

[q]uality of facilitation is critical to the reliability of the data. To achieve good facilitation requires time and resources devoted to careful selection of facilitators, their training and their supervision in the field. Even though this may initially add to costs and result in slow implementation, the outcomes are still highly cost effective compared with alternatives. (Holland, 2013: chapter 1)

The CRS Guide to Participatory Programme Evaluation (Aubel, 1999) recommends a thorough orientation whereby these activities are rehearsed. Practical exercises which allow team members to both observe and practice using appropriate interviewing skills such as role-plays and exercises in pairs or triads, can be designed for each of these topics.

## Defining indicators

The first step in a participatory assessment is to have the communities to identify the indicators by which they would like to be assessed. When formulating these indicators, insisting on precise definitions will help generate accurate analysis. The Participatory Impact Assessment (PIA) Design Guide by Tufts University suggests drilling down to as much specificity as possible. Their examples are: ‘I have more status in the community’ vs. the more specific indicator ‘I can now join the local savings and credit group in the village’ (see Catley et al., 2013).

The PIA also warns against relying too heavily on proxy indicators as they may bias the findings and results. For example, a project introducing high-yield crop varieties may measure crop yields as a proxy for impact assuming that increased production led to improved household food security. However, this proxy indicator does not necessarily describe changes to people’s lives that resulted from the transfers and there may have been unintended results. Therefore they recommend that during participatory assessments informants are asked not only about outcomes but also about their impact.

## Using group settings

Methods which rely on gathering information in group settings, such as developing social and census maps, have shown to generate very accurate data. Holland (2013) notes that this is especially true in contexts where there is public knowledge. In this scenario, community members can see what is being said and collectively correct and add details if needed. Where there are discrepancies, community members discuss until they reach agreement.

Though more of an assessment methodology, Save the Children’s Household Economy Approach (HEA) (Holzmann, 2008) has developed many techniques to improve accuracy that could be applied to evaluation. It is a detailed guide for measuring household incomes which relies heavily on participatory methods. The guide advises evaluators to challenge respondents when parts of their account contradict each other, until a logical and internally consistent picture is constructed. The methods described in the guide use iterative, semi-structured techniques which construct a picture of ‘how things work’ within a community.

## Recording detail

Recording detail will facilitate analysis and cross-referencing information among different stakeholder groups. In *Save the Children's toolkit on child-focused participatory monitoring and evaluation* (Lansdown and O'Kane, 2014), they recommend recording children's stories of most significant change in detail to provide solid evidence and allow for validation through other methods. They suggest documenting details about what happened, where, who was involved, how the change was brought about, and what evidence there is of the change that took place.

## Ensuring proper interpretation

Many participatory techniques are interactive and use visual exercises. It is critical to explain to communities the significance of these exercises and, if visual aids are being used, that these are discussed and explained so that everyone has a common understanding. Testing the diagrams or pictures beforehand is a way to see how these are construed by outsiders. Respondents should also be asked to explain their responses and interpretations by following up with further questioning. If the scoring is standardised, as is the case with other evaluation methods, repeating the exercise with different informants will increase the robustness of the results.

## Overcoming bias

The HEA recommends managing potential bias by being sensitive regarding the person to whom you are talking, being clear about the geographical area to which they are referring (spatial bias), including a seasonal perspective (seasonal bias), and making sure that the poor and women are well represented, at least as subjects of the inquiry (wealth, influence and gender bias and male bias).

A case study using participatory methods in Kosovo (see Westley and Mikhalev, 2002) encountered significant bias when interpreting the results due to ethnic prejudice between Serbian and Albanian team members. Upon reflection, the evaluation team recommended the following for promoting better shared understanding and minimising bias:

1. Showing **video tapes** of the sites and assessment work in the different ethnic areas to each team;
2. Holding carefully arranged **meetings** between team members if they were willing and interested;
3. Making an effort to **recruit other minority groups** into the assessment;
4. **Recruiting more individuals** who were comfortable working across the ethnic divide and provide them with the necessary security and protection.

## Triangulation and cross-checking

As described in a [previous EHA method note](#) (Alexander, 2014), triangulation is another important way to validate results. Using secondary data as much as possible (e.g. monitoring reports, external surveys, reports and direct observation) will help provide further insight into the findings.

Save the Children's HEA emphasises cross-checking items of reported information against others (reported access to food against minimum food needs; reported income against expenditure). The HEA also allows for cross-checking between interviews to ensure that the information is internally consistent and contributes to a logical and quantitatively accurate picture.

When cross-checking information, the HEA recommends comparing interview data with known constants. For example, minimum food income can be compared to malnutrition or starving rates. If the information provided by informants suggests that it is less than 2,100 kcals per person per day and the community is not starving, then further clarification is required. This holds true for information on income, which can be cross-checked with stated expenditure, observed standard of living, and information on particular household strategies, which must correspond with the characteristics of the local economy.

### Using new technologies

Practitioners and researchers have reflected on how a ‘tide of innovation’ in participatory data collection, and participatory evaluation tools came about along the ‘broader revolution in information and communication technology’ (Holland, 2013: 9). When mobility is restricted and information collection can put people at risk, ICT tools can contribute to facilitate data collection and facilitation from various stakeholders including programme participants (some examples of these practices are documented in a series of case studies commissioned by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) and are available [here](#)).

Moreover, a number of geospatial information technologies have been developed to allow cross-checking of the accuracy of locally developed maps. For example, a software called Sensemaker allows for update and meta-analysis of qualitative impact assessment data. The software has been used in Kenya where thousands of people have uploaded their stories of the effects of various project interventions. Sensemaker takes the qualitative data, be it stories, pictures or video clips, and conducts a ‘meta-analysis’ to identify patterns and trends. The aggregation of this data makes it possible to identify outliers and possible inaccuracies (Holland, 2013).

### Conclusion

Participatory evaluations imply some degree of ownership and control of the evaluation by the participants, ultimately contributing to greater accountability and transparency. A number of other benefits such as identifying more locally relevant evaluation questions, building capacity, sustaining organisational learning and growth, and developing local leaders and teams have been cited within the literature. This short note has highlighted ways to address quality and robustness of evidence generated through participatory evaluation; more detail can be found in the resources below.

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This Method Note is the result of a discussion on ‘Ensuring quality of evidence generated through participatory evaluation in humanitarian contexts’, which took place among members of the ALNAP Humanitarian Evaluation Community of Practice (CoP) between May and September 2014.

The CoP discussion presented in this brief note has been enriched with references to evaluation literature and guidance provided by Jessica Alexander and Francesca Bonino. Whenever possible, these notes highlight the experience from ALNAP Members in dealing with specific evidential challenges in humanitarian evaluation practice.

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