

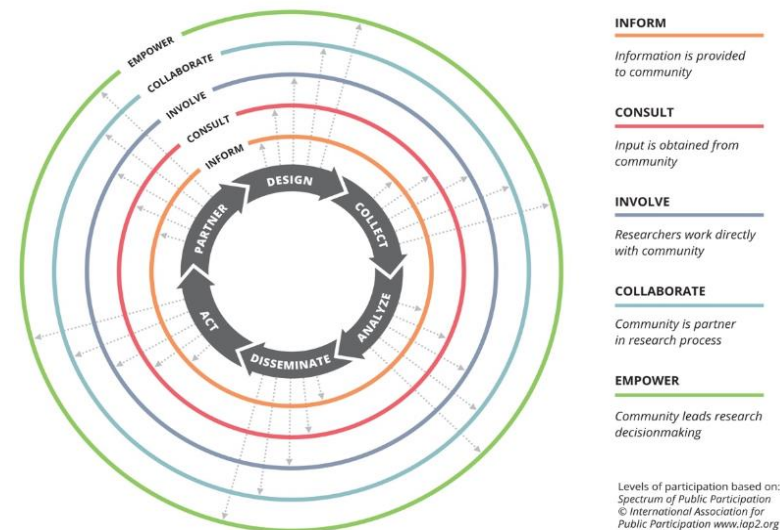
PARTICIPATORY EVIDENCE GENERATION AND LEARNING

Approaches for Jointly Realizing our Evidence Driven and Locally Led Commitments

MARCH 2024

What does it mean to be participatory?

ALNAP [defines participation](#) as “the engagement of affected populations...as social actors, with insights on their situation, and with competencies, energy and ideas of their own.” There is a longstanding recognition that the meaningful engagement of communities is both a core principle of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding work as well as a critical approach for enhancing the relevance, impact, and sustainability of programming. These ideas were echoed in the 2016 Grand Bargain among humanitarian actors, which called for a [“participation revolution”](#) to proactively and consistently engage affected communities throughout the program cycle. The International Association for Public Participation further identifies five [levels of participation](#): Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, and Empower. Throughout this document, we use “participatory” to imply processes that **collaborate** with and **empower** communities.



Why is it important to be participatory in our evidence generation and learning activities?

Mercy Corps’ 10-year strategy, our [Pathway to Possibility](#), prioritizes commitments to being evidence driven and locally led as central and cross-cutting practices in all of our programming. Being evidence driven means that we use data, evidence, and analytics to drive impact, scale what works, and influence others. Being locally led means that we are intentional about sharing and ceding power, building meaningful partnerships, and centering community voices. By extension, it is critical that we are being locally led in the way that we generate and harness evidence and learning. While traditional monitoring, evaluation, and research approaches are often extractive in nature – gleaning data from communities for analysis and use by external actors – investing in participatory methods can improve quality and reliability, strengthen local capacities, and deepen accountability to the communities who are involved. Ideally, this evidence is owned, disseminated, and used directly by the communities that generated it to tell their own stories and nurture their long-term resilience. Our research on [Participatory Adaptation in the COVID-19 Era](#) (PACE) also demonstrates the importance of participation and learning as enablers of adaptation.

How can we be more participatory in our evidence and learning activities?

The following table offers a toolbox of tested approaches that teams can employ to enhance participation in their evidence generation and learning activities throughout the program cycle. In many cases, these methods can be combined either with more traditional monitoring, evaluation, and learning approaches or with other participatory approaches in this toolbox. They do not necessarily replace more routine monitoring activities. The featured approaches do not ensure that a specific level on the participation spectrum will be achieved, and there are examples of all of these methods being conducted in ways that fail to maximize participation. Rather, teams should critically reflect on where their activities currently fall and aspire to increasingly **collaborate** and **empower**. This requires a deep understanding of local context dynamics and a spirit of humility. Where existing practitioner-oriented resources and case studies already exist, they are linked to their respective method. Moving forward, Mercy Corps is exploring opportunities to develop additional tools that support teams to operationalize these methods.

Method/Function	What is it	When to use it	Case Example
<p>Community-Defined Indicators</p> <p>Function: <i>Design/Start-Up</i></p>	<p><u>Community-defined indicators</u> are performance measures, especially at the outcome level, that are designed collaboratively with communities. Even when programs are required to use standardized indicators, this process can provide complementary insights to ensure that measurement reflects local priorities and lived experiences. Ideally, community members should remain involved in program monitoring, becoming owners of the process.</p>	<p>Community-defined indicators should be developed during program design and start-up to ensure integration of local perspectives into monitoring plans from the outset. It is especially important to use this approach to define concepts that have vague or multiple meanings, such as “safety” and “empowerment,” which often vary across participant profiles or localities. MEL teams can consider integrating questions on such concepts into baselining activities.</p>	<p>During the start-up phase for the Community Revitalization through Democratic Action program in Serbia in 2001, the team conducted focus group discussions with residents to understand their definition of the desired outcome of “revitalization.” The community identified “# of community-organized cultural and sporting events” as an important indicator, which was then added to standard donor indicators related to service delivery and employment.</p>
<p>Outcome Journals</p> <p>Function: <i>Monitoring</i></p>	<p><u>Outcome Journals</u> are a tool drawn from Outcome Mapping to monitor changes observed in program participants. What makes it a journal is the practice of regularly recording changes over time, based on set ‘progress markers.’ What makes it an outcome journal is the focus on changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and norms, rather than on outputs. While often managed by program teams, it can be adapted to empower participants in the process.</p>	<p>Outcome Journals are highly flexible tools that are primarily used for monitoring, but can also serve as a critical data source for evaluation and learning exercises. Once designed, Outcome Journals require minimal resources to deploy and maintain and are often very intuitive for data collectors. Therefore, they are well adapted to frequent cycles of data collection and to independent use by engaged program participants.</p>	<p>The <u>COMITAS</u> program in Nigeria is piloting Outcome Journals as a monitoring tool with their Natural Resource Management Committees (NRMCS). After initial workshops to guide the NRMCS in identifying progress markers and to train them on how to fill the Outcome Journal tool, the COMITAS team will be supporting the NRMCS members to document their observations about desired social changes on a monthly basis throughout 2024.</p>

<p>Most Significant Change (MSC)</p> <p>Function: <i>Monitoring or Evaluation</i></p>	<p>MSC is a participatory monitoring and evaluation method that uses storytelling and systematic selection of stories by program participants to generate a collective understanding of perceived outcomes and impact. MSC should not be conflated with the collection of success stories. Rather, MSC employs a rigorous process that illuminates community values and to produces a rich picture of complex social changes.</p>	<p>MSC is well-suited to programs where it is difficult to predict the outcome-level changes. It does not rely on a preestablished theory of change or indicators, and is therefore useful for identifying unexpected changes. Although MSC requires extensive time and resources, including a skilled facilitator to guide the process, the storytelling approach is often highly intuitive for participants without technical expertise.</p>	<p>In 2018, the PEACE III program in Uganda undertook MSC to evaluate its trauma healing activities. Through the process of selecting their MSC stories, participants identified their priorities and values underpinning those priorities, as well as the enablers and blockers that affected their MSC stories. This method enabled the program team to reveal unexpected change pathways and adapt the programming accordingly.</p>
<p>Photovoice</p> <p>Function: <i>Evaluation or Research</i></p>	<p>Photovoice is a participatory research method that uses photography and digital storytelling to explore complex social dynamics and to empower community participants by enabling them to represent their own stories. The approach engages community participants in taking photographs as a means of individual reflection, as a springboard for critical dialogue and collective analysis, and as a powerful tool for advocacy.</p>	<p>Photovoice was specifically designed to engage marginalized populations, who face barriers to participation in traditional research, in illuminating their needs and concerns. The process of taking and engaging with photographs is often very intuitive for community participants, including semi- or illiterate individuals. It is also a low-cost approach, especially in urban areas, where smartphone ownership is relatively high. However, it may be associated with data protection risks in certain contexts.</p>	<p>The Research and Learning Team is currently using Photovoice to explore how monitoring informal social protection can indicate humanitarian needs in Lebanon. Local researchers are responding to monthly prompts in the form of a photograph, before engaging in FGDs to discuss their images in the context of the broader research questions. The research team is finding that themes are emerging more readily than in traditional research. The findings will be published in mid-2024.</p>
<p>Participatory Action Research (PAR)</p> <p>Function: <i>Research</i></p>	<p>PAR is a research approach conducted collaboratively with communities for the purpose of democratizing knowledge and informing social change. PAR aims to build the capacity of communities to be self-sufficient in designing and implementing local solutions and generating their own learning. PAR aims to center community voices at all stages of the process, including research design, data analysis, and communication of findings.</p>	<p>PAR is well placed to engage with a broad scope of intersectoral local priorities and unpack complex social dynamics. It is best employed when programs have sufficient time and resources to build sustained and trusting relationships with community researchers in a way that nurtures local ownership and capacity. Ideally, programs should also have the time and resources to involve the community researchers in translating learning into practical action.</p>	<p>In Northeast Syria, the Peace & Conflict team conducted a year-long PAR project from 2021-2022 aimed at assessing and addressing barriers to social cohesion and inclusive development. A team of 20 local researchers led the process, shaping the research questions and analysis and undertaking advocacy efforts based on the findings. The PAR approach also enabled the program team to identify unexpected opportunities for future activities.</p>

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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