Rethinking Measurement & Evaluation: Power, Participation and Impact

Jonathan Röders and Dr Erin McFee

In peacebuilding, as well as in formerly armed actor reintegration (FAA) and other dimensions of international development and humanitarian work, measuring intervention success is an inherently political act. How success is measured determines what interventions should look like and, thus, where funding goes, vesting considerable power in those who define these outcomes. Moreover, given the critical role of measurement and evaluation in program design, it has profound implications for whether interventions actually achieve meaningful change on the ground.

Conventional measurement and evaluation (M&E) systems tend to rely on externally defined, quantifiable indicators developed by experts from donor countries, international organizations, and consulting firms, among other stakeholders. The assumptions underlying these indicators often fail to capture or misinterpret contextual complexities, local characteristics, and community needs and challenges.

This Research Brief discusses the problems with conventional forms of M&E and the role of alternative, participatory approaches in reducing power imbalances, bridging the gap between local and donor priorities, and enhancing intervention efficiency and impact.

The (False) Promises of Traditional Indicators

Traditional indicators offer standardization, comparability, easy replicability, and a perception of objectivity due to their numeric and seemingly clear, unambiguous, and scientific nature— making them appear universally applicable across diverse contexts.

With the growth of the humanitarian and development field, these simplified, numeric forms of measuring impact—originating in Western administrative states, economics, and business management—have been adopted across sectors and organizations, most notably by multilateral aid agencies such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Over time, downward pressures of "evidence-based funding" have also anchored these M&E systems among non-governmental and civil society organizations in developed and developing countries alike.

As a result, despite their promise of objectivity, traditional indicators often mask or misrepresent rather than clarify the realities they aim to measure. This often takes the form of inaccurate assumptions about the nature of a problem or positive outcome. For example, the tendency to treat FAAs as a homogenous group—overlooking distinctions in rank, gender, age, or skills—has led to flawed reintegration efforts. In Burundi, this approach contributed

to the exclusion of mid-level commanders from security sector reforms, some of whom later remobilized disillusioned youth. Many of these young people had found the vocational training in carpentry and agriculture irrelevant, fueling their return to militia activity. In this, and many similar cases, M&E reports tallying the number of disarmed combatants, short-term declines in community violence, workshop attendance, and program graduation figures provided poor evidence for the prospective sustainability and success of the reintegration effort.

In other words, treating complex, contextual social phenomena as "countable" activities fails to capture the structural dimensions of change underlying the desired outcomes. This falls short of assessing not only the contextual relevance of interventions themselves but also the more relational or affective dimensions of reintegration, such as security perceptions, trust in institutions and peace agreements, shifts in community attitudes, informal networks of support, and changing feelings of belonging.

These dimensions are harder to quantify but are often more indicative of long-term transformation. The pressure on implementing organizations to prioritize what is readily measurable—and thus easily reportable and fundable— over what is locally needed and meaningful can distort interventions, lead to wasteful budgeting, and compromise their impact.

M&E and Power Imbalances

Conventional approaches to M&E position communities as objects of measurement rather than agents in the programming and evaluation process despite them being experts on their own needs and circumstances. In such settings, indicators do not simply measure outcomes; they reshape them by defining what problems and solutions look like and what knowledge is considered legitimate, often marginalizing locally driven solutions. This vests decision-making authority uniquely within external stakeholders and fails to acknowledge the knowledge, agency, and aspirations of those most affected by the issues at stake and the interventions addressing them.

For those at the receiving end of aid, M&E and the effort invested into it, can quickly devolve into a highly performative exercise, which can further undermine trust in external stakeholders and participation in programs. For instance, when the Corioli Institute began working with local leaders in Colombia involved in reintegration programming, they described the fatigue and disillusionment caused by the constant need to document meetings and meet attendance quotas that yielded no substantive engagement or change.

Participatory M&E in Practice

In light of these practical and ethical arguments, communities subject to interventions should take part in the design of indicators measuring their success and the

interpretation of their results. Participatory M&E co-constructs knowledge that reflects lived experiences and local knowledge frameworks, challenging the assumption that expertise flows primarily from global North to global South. Ideally, this process is fully integrated into the entire project cycle while also providing communities with the opportunity to actively participate in adjustment proposals grounded in insights from M&E data.

Several actionable frameworks and applications of this kind already exist, such as the GAIN Peacebuilding Indicators developed by Catholic Relief Services and the Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation, Reflection, and Learning (PMERL) Manual developed by CARE International and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) for community-based adaptation.

GAIN represents a structured approach in which project teams and local stakeholders collaboratively define both qualitative and quantitative indicators through a rigorous, context-sensitive process. This joint work includes clarifying key terms within each indicator—such as what constitutes a "youth organization" or a "joint initiative"—to avoid vague or externally imposed definitions.

Notably, GAIN provides 18 illustrative peacebuilding indicators—covering dimensions like increased equity, trust, and social cohesion—that capture the nuanced, relational nature of peacebuilding results while remaining adaptable to diverse contexts. Each indicator is accompanied by interpretation prompts designed to spark discussion and reflection within project teams and with affected communities throughout implementation.

Similarly, the CARE-IIED PMERL manual embeds these principles in practice by equipping local practitioners and communities to track what resilience and adaptation really look like in their daily lives. It emphasizes co-creating indicators, using participatory tools like scenario mapping and shared learning sessions, and embedding cycles of collective reflection to adjust strategies in real time.

Both GAIN and the PMERL manual enable practitioners to interrogate assumptions underpinning their theories of change, prioritizing collaborative learning and power-sharing over top-down reporting and implementation. In practice, this co-construction and co-implementation of M&E frameworks aims to ensure that the goals defined and evidence gathered are not only meaningful but also genuinely inform course corrections, foster accountability, and sustain local ownership long after donors exit.

Limitations of Participatory M&E

While the case for participatory M&E is compelling, implementation planning needs to account for the potential challenges involved. For instance, labeling M&E as "participatory" doesn't guarantee meaningful participation from all affected stakeholder groups. The inclusivity of and representativeness of findings from participatory evaluations is not self-evident, particularly when certain community members dominate discussions or when existing power dynamics influence who feels empowered to speak.

Operationalizing participatory M&E thus requires careful sensitivity to local socio-economic and political conditions to avoid exacerbating the vulnerabilities of already marginalized groups: e.g., through activities such as power mapping, exploratory field studies, or a stakeholder analysis that includes analyzing historical relationships and reputations of key actors vis-à-vis one another. This is especially important given that, in many contexts, communal decision-making is shaped by histories of intragroup conflict and unequal power and resource distribution.

Furthermore, major donors continue to exert pressure for conventional metrics, which can place organizations in a difficult position—balancing the need to strengthen meaningful M&E with the imperative to satisfy donor demands on short project timelines. Hybrid models of evaluation or two-tier reporting systems, balancing donor requirements and M&E innovation, can place an additional burden on organizations. To shift entrenched expectations, it is all the more necessary to invest in systematic efforts to communicate the value of participatory approaches: the richer forms of evidence they produce and the tangible improvements they enable in project design and success for the same amount of money invested.

The Role of Methodology

Notably, participatory approaches to M&E do not prescribe a uniform methodology for evaluation. The limitation of conventional indicators lies not in their quantitative nature, but in their tendency to apply standardized measures across varied contexts—often quantifying aspects that do not meaningfully reflect a program's effectiveness or sustainability. Quantitative methodologies to collect M&E data are still practical and useful, as long as they are tailored to local contexts and, when designed through participatory methods, can yield important insights that reflect the perspectives of a broader cross-section of the population.

Among organizations working with alternative approaches to M&E indicators, there is a noticeable tendency to rely more heavily on qualitative methods. This is because outcomes related to structural change—as well as context-specific social dynamics, nuanced perspectives, and diverse viewpoints and cultural lenses—are often more effectively captured through qualitative inquiry. These methodologies can take the form of commonly used interview, focus group formats, and ethnographic observations, but also creative formats like filmmaking, outcomes harvesting, or artistic exercises. Especially in the exploratory phases of projects necessary to establish participatory baseline indicators of any nature, qualitative methods are indispensable.

In sum, participatory M&E aims to reshape the nature of the evidence and the power relations embedded in evidence-based funding systems, but its effective implementation depends on a flexible, context-responsive mix of methodologies and tools. The following **roadmap for collaborative Measurement, Evaluation & Learning** showcases some of the steps relevant in this process.

Stakeholder Power & Conflict Analysis

Conduct comprehensive analysis of local socio-economic and political conditions. Map historical relationships and conflicts between key actors and **identify potential power imbalances** that could affect participation. Include marginalized groups often excluded from decision-making.

Useful Tool(s):
Stakeholder Power Analysis
Conflict-Sensitive M&E

Context-Sensitive Indicator Development

Develop indicators that capture **structural dimensions of change** and relational aspects like trust, security perceptions, and community attitudes. Balance quantitative metrics with qualitative insights aiming to capture lived experiences and nuanced perspectives.

Useful Tool(s):
Participatory Learning & Action (PLA)
Community Score Cards

Collaborative Interpretation & Programming

Engage communities as **co-interpreters of data** rather than passive subjects. Create **continuous feedback loops**, be they formal or informal, for real-time learning and ensure interpretation reflects multiple viewpoints and integrates local knowledge frameworks.

Useful Tool(s):
Adaptive Peacebuilding Programming Through Effective Feedback Loops: Promising Practices

---

| 3-6 months before launch | 1–3 months before launch | Throughout project — quarterly or per cycle | Every 3-6 months during implementation | Ongoing; major reflection at midline and endline |

Collaborative Framework Design

Co-design evaluation framework with local stakeholders through inclusive dialogue. Jointly clarify key terms, review **theory of change assumption**s and establish **shared understanding of success**. Move beyond consultation to genuine co-construction of knowledge.

Useful Tool(s):
Guidance for Designing, Monitoring, and Evaluating Peacebuilding Projects: Using Theories of Change

Participatory Data Collection

Use **flexible mix of methodologies** tailored to local contexts. Employ both traditional methods (interviews, focus groups, surveys) and appropriate creative formats (filmmaking, body mapping, artistic exercises) to capture a diverse array of goals, priorities and possible outcomes.

Useful Tool(s):
Participatory Methods in Peacebuilding Work
Outcome Harvesting

Adaptive Learning Process

Enable communities to give feedback on adjustment proposals grounded in M&E insights. Maintain **responsiveness to shifting contexts**, collect follow-up data and use findings to improve intervention design and implementation in real-time.

Useful Tool(s):
Closing the Loop: Effective Feedback in Humanitarian Contexts

corioli.org