Meaningful participation in evaluations is increasingly becoming difficult to implement. Implementing partners deal with conflicting priorities over combining performance-based accountability with budgetary and time constraints and in-depth consultation leading to community ownership.

The barrier in balancing priorities places Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in precarious positions as they often need to advocate for the community while also performing the role of being ‘participatory.’ It is not always possible to include every stakeholder due to feasibility, financial, and time availability. This article analyzes the definition of what ‘participatory enough’ entails. Further, it explores the barriers for CSOs in conducting participatory evaluations.
Josephine Tsui, Fiable Development, and Rituu B. Nanda, Global Fund for Children and Institute of Social Studies Trust

**Key Messages**

- There are different approaches in understanding participation in evaluation, i.e. through the role of civil society.
- Evaluators must consider values, who participates, and the feasibility of participating in evaluations when facilitated by civil society organizations.
- A self-reflective component is necessary for evaluations to be ‘participatory.’
- Evaluation scientific rigor can work together with ‘participatory practices.’ Including participation in evaluations can enhance rigor.

**Introduction**

In the international development community, donors, governments, and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) underline the importance of participation and greater citizen voice. However, there is pressure to demonstrate effectiveness and impact and ‘management by results’ with a growing scarcity of funds. In addition, non-governmental actors usually undertake reporting and documentation of participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes. CSOs are defined as all those that include non-market and non-state organizations (UNDP, 2013). They are regarded as the key actors in introducing and sustaining participation in the monitoring and evaluation process (intract, 2017).

There are many discussions about the need for participation in evaluations, but there is little about standards of the participatory process and the varied use of the term ‘participation. Most research around the term ‘participation’ is over 20 years old. While many assume the method is limited to obtaining qualitative data from the program participants' opinions, practitioners and academics do not consider the power dynamics of evaluation design. CSOs are at the center of the debate as they simultaneously need to advocate for marginalized people and negotiate the process where program participants are involved. As a result, the political tension of balancing accountability and learning while maintaining budget and time constraints has dictated how the evaluation community defines participation.

This article explores the parameters of participation in evaluation: when is evaluation participatory 'enough'? What is considered useful, and valuable for whom within communities? How do CSOs demonstrate ‘participation’, and what prevents evaluations from being participatory? This article provides evidence from mixed methods. Literature reviews different participation approaches and how these may affect CSOs’ contributions to the evaluation community. survey and nine interviews of CSOs, experts, and donors over five weeks. The authors sourced the Gender and Evaluation global community of close to 5000 members for further opinions.
Different approaches to Participation and Implications

Participation in evaluation attempts to actively involve key stakeholders such as communities in designing and implementing an evaluation. This approach’s effectiveness depends on the relationship between key stakeholders: the policy-makers, service providers (often the CSOs), and communities. Historically, evidence suggests mixed results of participatory processes. Such approaches improve information flow and create new delivery mechanisms but critics assert that participation does not lead to empowerment as it does not challenge centralized decision-making and resource allocation (Mubita et al., 2017). A Zambian case study (Mubita et al., 2017) demonstrates participation techniques can often conceal traditional relationships of power. This means participation must be politically contextual and this can place CSOs at risk as they balance the donor’s objectives while motivating community members to participate.

Analyzing different participation frameworks can give us insight into how to remove the burden on CSOs. Related literature most often references Arstein's ladder, which looks at participation from the perspective of recipients ranging from citizen control at the top to tokenism with the lowest category of non-participation of the participants. Similarly, the Utilization-focused evaluation (UFE) approach is based on the principle that an evaluation should be judged on its usefulness to its intended users. However, the methodology discusses ‘involvement,’ not explicitly about the ‘participatory’ aspect of evaluation (Patton, 2008). The ownership narrative suggests that participants are in the best position to judge how the intervention has affected their lives. In turn, they may be able to identify appropriate questions and causal pathways and outcomes to examine (Levine & Griñó, 2015).

Fetterman et al. (2017) highlight difference among collaborative, participatory, and empowerment approaches to evaluation in terms of evaluators’ role and control of stakeholders. These frameworks are all similar in rating one element upon a one-dimensional gradient.

However, White (1996) diverges from the hierarchy and adapts the definitions of participation based on recipients' interests: Nominal, Instrumental, Representative, and Transformative (See Table 1 for definitions).

Looking at White’s typology, collecting data from community members can be an instrumental or representative form of participation. At times, some stakeholders may only want a nominal presence in the evaluation such as senior leaders present for the important meetings. Transformational participation requires ways for the community to have a decision and acting power for themselves. Removing the hierarchy ensures that all participants have different but equitable presence during the entire evaluation cycle.

White’s typology of participation is useful to have explicit discussions with different stakeholders. A Transformational
form of participation requires stakeholder's involvement in the decision and actions of evaluations. While there are many positives in designing an evaluation that engages stakeholders, evaluators must clarify:

- What value does this evaluation serve?
- Whose participation matters the most and when?
- What form of participation is feasible concerning resources?

To explore these questions, here are three key tensions we must be considerate of:

Who is the data provider/data extractor?

The main issue of participation in evaluation is knowing who the evaluation serves. Half of the CSO interviewees conducted mentioned collecting data but feeling unsure about the information's purpose or goal. Stakeholders were sometimes simply 'data providers', while some CSOs felt cornered to be the 'data extractors' according to one respondent. Evaluation commissioners predominantly respond to the demands of donor practices (Intrac, 2017). Due to the high reliance on being donor-focused and analyzing the degree to which results donor-values are achieved, these types of evaluations pay attention to some stakeholders' needs (primarily donors and external actors) and may miss other critical perspectives. Evaluators interviewed also mentioned that they need to involve donors throughout the process to use findings, which creates heavy communication burdens. One example cited by CSO interviews reported having their social capital damaged when the evaluation expectations were donor-driven. The project prioritized information for the international community more than the implementation. There was a lack of communication from the evaluation team to the local CSO regarding evaluation indicators. The community became deeply unsatisfied with the process. In the end, the umbrella CSO raised funds for a second more inclusive evaluation using alternative methods of inquiry. This allowed the local CSO staff and communities to give their insights on the program but provided a positive experience as it democratized learning across all stakeholders.

Table 1: Types of participation by program participants (White, 1996, cited in Cornwall, 2008 and Guijt, 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>What participation means to the implementing agency</th>
<th>What participation means for those on the receiving end</th>
<th>What participation is for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominal</td>
<td>Legitimation: to show they are doing something</td>
<td>Inclusion: to retain some access to potential benefits</td>
<td>Display</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Efficiency: to limit funders’ input, draw on community contribution and make projects more cost-effective</td>
<td>Cost: time spent on project-related labor and other activities</td>
<td>As a means to achieve cost-effectiveness and create local facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representative</td>
<td>Sustainability: to avoid creating dependency</td>
<td>Leverage: to influence the shape of the project and its management</td>
<td>To give people a voice in determining their own development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformative</td>
<td>Empowerment: to enable people to make their own decisions, work out what to do, and take action</td>
<td>Empowerment: to enable people to decide and act for themselves</td>
<td>As a means and an end/a continuing dynamic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning vs. accountability

Evaluators often have to navigate a thin line between learning and accountability when promoting the evaluation among the program team and reporting to the donors. In these instances, when accountability is downward and CSOs are answerable to the donor(s), there is often a focus on compliance-checking and financial accountability, making it difficult to combine learning and accountability. The tension between learning and accountability is not necessary and is avoidable. Accountability traditionally has been used to serve financial responsibilities, however, it can also be used for oneself (Guijt, 2010). To take responsibility and accountability for oneself allows the self to learn and to grow. This changes the focus of the evaluation from a downward accountability mechanism into a learning exercise. Evaluations that focus on the process have a stronger possibility of fostering ownership within the community and can involve the necessary stakeholders for the findings' greatest use.

Therefore, it may be more useful to separate the accountability and learning function if the donors need to prioritize financial compliance. Focusing on learning or self-accountability means giving CSOs the autonomy to use the evaluation budget in ways that serve their own goals. Separating financial compliance from learning may allow the evaluation community to be more honest about their intentions and goals. One CSO participant interviewed discussed a recent project that took place over three years. During this period, the project consisted of a one-year baseline, one year to implement a policy-influencing project, and one-year for the end line evaluation. The heavy emphasis on evaluation represented a greater emphasis on gathering data for external stakeholders rather than internal growth.

Definition of rigor

Participatory methods are best used for exploring complex ideas where the interconnection between individuals is prioritized. Participation in evaluations focuses on the self-reflective exercises of what worked in this context. This leads to some form of interpretation, and there may be moments of differing views and contestation (Cartwright, 2019). Meanwhile, rigor (as defined by Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs)) looks to make information generalizable and usable for all contexts, which only allows for a narrow set of conclusions (Cartwright, 2019). Therefore, it can be difficult to reconcile the competing demands of scientific rigor and participation.

While not mutually exclusive, there is space for internal learning and reflection, and external validity can also be included. Literature (Guijt, 2014, Leykum, et al., 2009) suggests analyzing RCTs using a cyclical reflection exercise, not currently standard practice. The reflective exercise brings the central actor into the decision-making role, increasing the rigor as it includes a greater number of perspectives. The reflective practice also forces the evaluations to be more explicit about any potential bias.

An example of a self-reflective exercise is included in the emerging trend ‘Trust-based Philanthropy’ (Citi Foundation, 2020). It focuses on making internal changes within grant-making organizations and how they work with local CSOs through M&E systems. The method revolves around learning and outcomes determined by grantees. Grant-making organizations build a trusting relationship with the grantees to improve their community's lives by focusing on general operating support and capacity building funding with less focus on financial accountability.

Tools to ensure representatives from CSOs can include outcome harvesting as there are no preconceived notions of outcomes or goals. Outcomes Harvesting begins with results and traces back causality in a
collaborative process between donor and grantee. This may be effective for monitoring, evaluating, and learning in a reflective way.

Lastly, self-measurement practices in communities are gaining popularity and are known to add a rigorous form of reflective data. For example, Constellation (Nanda, 2019) facilitates a process where the communities are involved in the design, implementation and measurement of the issue. Through self-measurement practices, the communities are motivated to generate their own or use existing data to make decisions and take actions. With such a process, communities develop an evaluative perspective of the actions they perform together, learning as they take stock and appreciate what they are doing: an approach that involves intuitive or unconscious learning, but one that also generates change.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Evidence demonstrates that it is possible to include a high degree of participation in rigorous evaluations. Evaluators must consider who the evaluation serves, whose participation matters the most, and mitigate constraints. Self-reflective processes can add to rigor if done properly. To ensure truly participatory evaluations, the following recommendations should be followed:

1. **Be explicit on the type of participatory evaluation you are practicing.** From White's typologies, there are four types (Nominal, Instrumental, Representative, Transformative).

2. **Build-in self-reflective practices.** When organizations intend to learn, the evaluation centers on the participants. Focus on the actor rather than the external participant. Find ways to separate learning evaluations from those that focus on compliance and accountability.

3. **Acknowledge the power imbalance.** As reflective evaluation practitioners, being explicit with the power imbalance between evaluators and stakeholders will only help to increase the rigor.

4. **Offer strength-based approaches.** Strength-based approaches suggest that communities have the potential to deal with their issues. In believing in the community’s potential, we also empower them to track their progress.

5. **Encourage capacity-building.** Capacity building is a form of exchange that encourages participation and the collaborative effort between donors and grantees to be more effective in monitoring and evaluation.
References


Josephine Tsui is the Director of Fiable Development Ltd. and a research associate for the Overseas Development Institute. Josephine specializes in designing, monitoring, and evaluating research programs, which are aiming for policy influence. She is known for her work in policy influence as she is the lead author of “Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning in an Adaptive Context”, and “Monitoring and Evaluating Policy Influence” and second author of Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) “International Practices in Policy Dialogue.” She has an MSc from the School of Oriental and African Studies, UK.

Rituu B. Nanda is an M&E consultant with Global Fund for Children and Institute of Social Studies Trust. Her skills include community engagement, participatory action research, M&E, and Knowledge Management. She is interested in participatory practices, appreciative approaches, systems thinking and issues around equity. As part of her work, she moderates the Gender and Evaluation community https://gendereval.ning.com/. She is a member of the management group of EvalGender+. She leads action group (Asia Pacific Evaluation Association) on strengthening evaluation in communities and founding member of India's Evaluation Community. She is pursuing her second master's degree in evaluation and has certification in public health.