

Chapter 10

Design of the Participatory Evaluation of a Public Care Service for Older Adults in Ecuador

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Abstract

This chapter presents the design process of the first participatory evaluation driven from within the public sector in Ecuador, led by the National Planning Secretariat (SNP) —the governing body of the country’s Monitoring and Evaluation Subsystem— and supported by the Focelac+ project. It sets out the path taken to secure the commitment of various institutions to working in a participatory way, including the population benefiting from the service, with the aim of defining the evaluation of the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces for Older Adults, a programme run by the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES). The chapter describes the approach, the methodology and the key moments in designing the participatory evaluation, highlighting the reflections and lessons that emerged during the process, as well as the uncertainties and challenges faced. This reflection on the practice of inclusive social evaluation underscores the central role of the human factor, which made it possible to develop the participatory design of the evaluation in just six weeks. The evaluation itself became an exercise in inclusion, respect and appreciation for the older population living in poverty and vulnerability — a population that is seldom taken into account in the evaluation of public policy.

Keywords

Participatory Evaluation, Social Inclusion, Older Adults, Lessons Learned, Methodology.

Citation

Jaramillo, C. L., & Corrales, J. (2026). Design of the participatory evaluation of a public care service for older adults in Ecuador. In P. Rodríguez Bilella & E. Tapella (Eds.), *Evaluation, democracy and transformation. Experiences of participatory evaluation in Latin America*. Vientosur.

Introduction

In Ecuador, evaluation processes have always been a challenge, since institutionalising evaluation has not been easy due to a lack of political support and knowledge; as a result, the approach taken to evaluation often depends on whichever authorities happen to be in office.

This chapter gives an account of the participatory process followed within the framework of the National Planning Secretariat (SNP) —through its Undersecretariat for Evaluation and its Directorate for Territorial Evaluation— to design a participatory evaluation (PE) of the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces for Older Adults (ESE), an intervention run by Ecuador’s Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES). Thanks to the support of the SNP’s authorities, the first participatory evaluation driven from within the public sector in the country was launched, focused on assessing this initiative aimed at older persons living in conditions of poverty, extreme poverty and vulnerability.

The design of this participatory evaluation proved to be a process of great learning that was not free of difficulties and fears. Reflecting from practice on inclusive social evaluation entails considering the methodological, conceptual and policy context aspects of evaluation, but —above all— the central place occupied by the human factor in making it possible to produce this design in just six weeks. This account is also a gesture of gratitude to everyone on

the team who contributed with commitment and dedication to the design of this PE —a design that required the participating older adults to invest time and effort in contributing their perspective on the key features the evaluation should have—. For the staff of the Ecuadorian public bodies, it was a period of heavy workload and uncertainty, owing to the transition to a new national government. Even so, many of them did not hesitate to devote even their holiday time to completing the design, with no certainty that they would remain in their posts afterwards.

The authors of this chapter are the facilitator of the process and the Undersecretary for Evaluation of Ecuador’s governing body for evaluation, and we were always certain (as was the rest of the team) that we had been called upon to work for the wellbeing of the older population. For this reason, the proposed participatory evaluation of the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces for Older Adults became, in itself, an exercise in inclusion, respect and appreciation for that population living in poverty and vulnerability, which is not usually taken into account in the design and evaluation of public policy.

This journey through the design process of the PE began with the effort it took the team of Ecuador’s National Planning Secretariat (SNP), together with the Focelac+ project,⁷² to secure the support of the authorities and

⁷² Strengthening a Culture of Evaluation and Learning in Latin America with a Global Outlook, a project implemented by the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) and Costa Rica’s Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy (Mideplan).

the willingness of a policy body prepared to commit to this work. We discuss this in the first section of the chapter, set against a brief background on the National Evaluation System in Ecuador.

The second section sets out the working approach and the perspective that we sought to bring to the design of this participatory evaluation, which formed the for its initial steps. By presenting the main moments of the PE design in sequence, we weave in reflections and lessons learned while also acknowledging the uncertainties and challenges we faced.

The third section explains, in broad terms, the methodology of the initial workshop to define the foundations of the PE design and the reflections that arose from this first decisive moment. Building on this reflection, the fourth section presents the phase of constructing the evaluation instruments, and the fifth section then covers the drafting of the final document and its corresponding dissemination.

The sixth section outlines the challenges that lie ahead in order to bring this PE to fruition once the formulation stage has been completed. Finally, the seventh section summarises the main lessons interwoven throughout the chapter.

We have reconstructed the experience of designing this PE—which was carried out during 2024—in the hope that it may prove useful within the reflective processes to which this book invites us. There are many of us who share the intention of making evaluation processes effective instruments for social inclusion, the empowerment of the most vulnerable sectors and social change.

Background

A study conducted in 2022 on the institutionalisation of evaluation in the Americas (Arévalo Gross & Cumandá Montesdeoca, 2022) states that Ecuador has no widespread evaluation culture that closes the cycle of planning, monitoring and evaluation; as a result, evaluation findings are frequently not taken into account when new public interventions are formulated. Nor are evaluations used in public debate; they are simply used for accountability purposes, as administrative justification for the use of resources. In addition, information is often lost when authorities change, and it is not available in a form accessible to a broad public.

Moreover, the country's political environment has led over the past decade to multiple changes in the governing body for evaluation⁷³ that affect the continuity of capacity building efforts in evaluation (both individual and organisational) within state and government entities, and has additionally entailed a high turnover of staff.

Against this backdrop, the challenges for evaluation in Ecuador are considerable, both in terms of public sector action and in terms of public deliberation aimed at positioning evaluation as a key management tool

⁷³ In 2019 the National Secretariat for Planning and Development (Senplades) became the Technical Planning Secretariat ("Planifica Ecuador"), and subsequently, in 2021, the National Planning Secretariat (SNP) was created. The SNP is currently headed by a National Secretary with the rank of Minister of State. It held this rank in the past as well, but one of the reforms reduced the size and the capacity for action of the country's governing body for evaluation.

for good governance and for achieving the country's development goals. Within this framework, promoting a participatory evaluation from within the public-sector was quite a challenge for the Undersecretariat of Evaluation of the SNP, whose mission is:

to lead the processes of evaluating national, territorial, sectoral and institutional investment and planning instruments and to build technical capacities within State institutions on matters relating to evaluation, with the aim of providing inputs to enhance transparency and improve the application of public policy. (Secretaría Nacional de Planificación de Ecuador, n.d., p. 18)

The support of the Focelac+ project was decisive and is connected with work that has been ongoing since 2015, with DEval's support, to promote evaluation capacity strengthening in Ecuador. In this specific case, economic support was provided for two staff members of the SNP to take part in a diploma course on participatory evaluation in Mexico, the facilitator who would support the entire design of the participatory evaluation was contracted, and guidance was provided throughout the entire process.

The first steps in defining the initiative to be evaluated were taken in early 2023. This involved approaches to six different public entities to explore the possibilities of taking it forward. It was not easy, since many

institutions still hold a mistaken view of evaluation and regard it as synonymous with audit or financial control. Moreover, the most common evaluations in the country, and those with the greatest political backing, are impact evaluations.

In the end, the Ministry for Economic and Social Inclusion expressed interest and availability through its Socialisation and Encounter Spaces programme, which promotes active and healthy ageing among older persons living in conditions of poverty, extreme poverty and vulnerability. The programme runs recreational, social and occupational therapy activities intended to foster socialisation, autonomy, organisation and entertainment, promoting coexistence, participation, solidarity and older adults' relationship with their social environment. Working in group sessions of around 25 older persons, the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces thus constitute a way of promoting the wellbeing of independent older persons and those with mild dependence—that is, those who do not require help from others to get around and to carry out their basic and instrumental activities of daily living—.

Table 1 shows the scope defined for this participatory evaluation, whose implementation was planned for 2024—that is, just a few months after the end of the methodological design stage—.

Object of study	Unit of study	Timeframe	Geographical scope	Criteria
Gerontological care service in the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces	Three care units representing different forms of administration: directly by the Ministry, under agreement with an NGO, and under agreement with a decentralised authority	2019-2023 period	Three care units in two provinces. For the quantitative analyses, data were taken from all the care units in the two zones where the pilot units are located	Relevance Effectiveness Efficiency Sustainability Coherence

Table 1. *Boundaries and scope of this participatory evaluation.*
Source: prepared by the authors.

The objective of the PE was set in terms of improving the service, taking the three care units as a pilot reference. The object of study is therefore broad and is not confined solely to the cases that would serve as a reference. Likewise, the aim was to ensure that the three forms of administration of the service were represented.

Working approach and first step in developing the design

The design of this PE had an additional purpose: the aim was for the evaluation team to become acquainted with both the theory and the practice of this type of evaluation. Hence one of the key planned

activities was a face-to-face workshop delivered by the EvalParticipativa initiative, to be attended mainly by people from the institutions connected with the intervention to be evaluated, although additional places were also made available for other entities present in Ecuador, with the aim of strengthening evaluation capacities within the institutional environment.

One of the distinctive hallmarks of PE is placing people at the centre and including the target population in the evaluation team. In the case of the older population this takes on even greater importance as an expression of their rights, given that social prejudices about their capabilities are so frequent. As Nussbaum and Levmore (2017) put it:

Finally, one of the most baneful of all stereotypes about aging people is that they have no agency [...] To rob aging people of agency and choice in the way one describes them is to dehumanize and objectify in a particularly insulting manner. (p. 25)

It follows, then, that their active, conscious and committed participation in the PE of the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces was an affirmative action in terms of recognising their rights and their potential.

It was challenging to provide sufficient information to the older persons who would form part of the team so that they could take part in the activities. Up to that point, it was not known whether it would be possible to have people with a sufficient level of literacy or whether they would need additional support.

The work plan was drawn up based on the principles set out in the Evaluation Standards for Latin America and the Caribbean (ReLAC, 2021) and the guidelines of the Sowing and Harvesting handbook (Tapella et al., 2021). In addition, the lessons learned from Focelac+ in facilitating multistakeholder evaluation processes were incorporated, in the sense of having two types of teams responsible for the evaluation: one involved in more direct, day-to-day management, and a broader group including relevant stakeholders, among them those promoting the evaluation, academia and representatives of civil society.

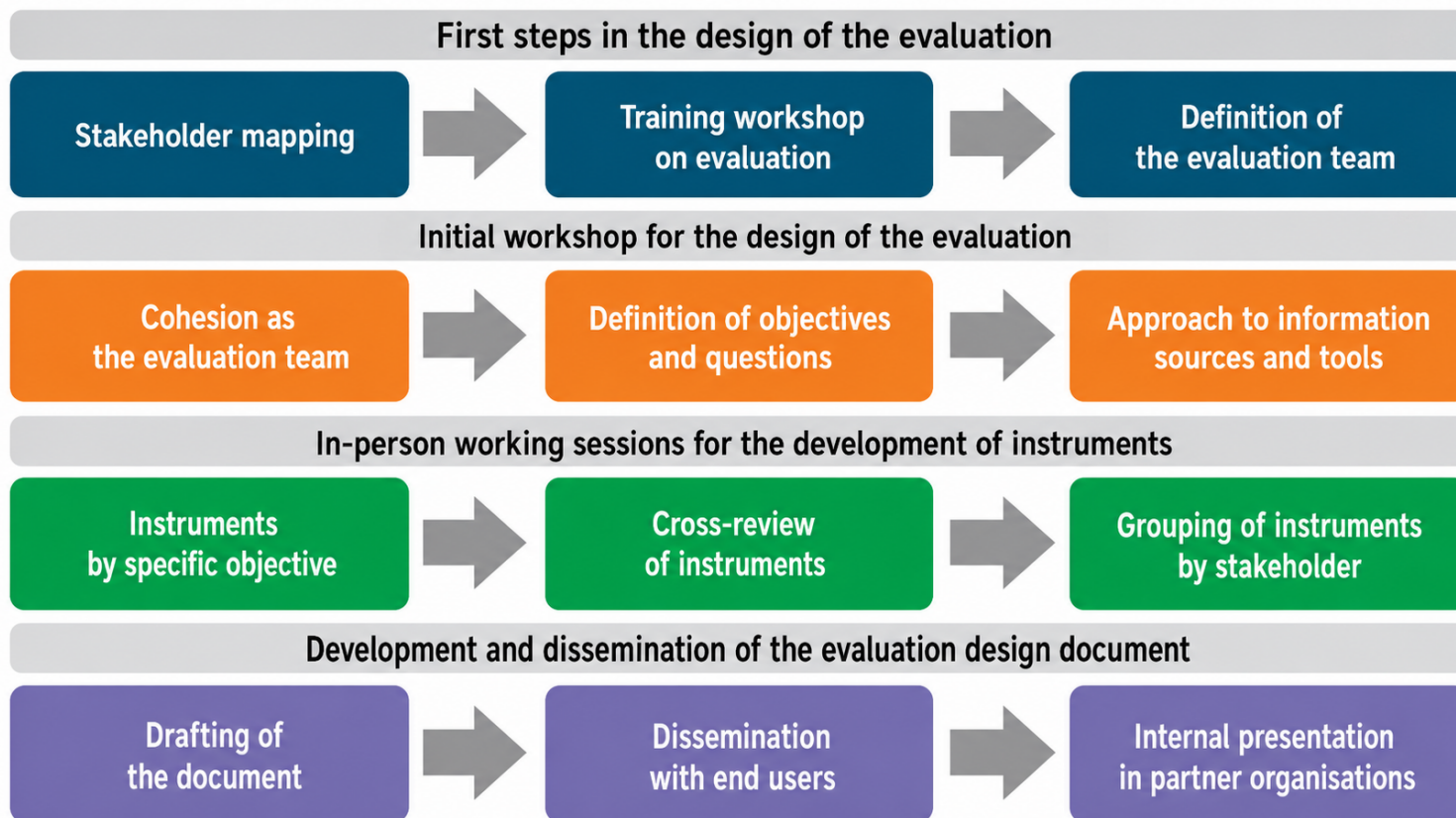
It was envisaged that, throughout the PE design process, care would be taken to ensure a high level of involvement of the various stakeholders in decision-

making on the strategic aspects of an evaluation, so as to guarantee that they were not mere instruments or passive informants but were genuinely empowered throughout the process and that their participation was active and conscious.

This was essential given the diversity, the inequalities and the power asymmetries among the various stakeholders who would interact within the evaluation team: public officials, people from academia and civil society, older adults benefiting from the programme, and professionals working directly in their care. As explained below, forming the team is a first step before beginning the design of the evaluation, since all stakeholders take part in the central decisions about what to evaluate, how and for what purpose.

Consequently, it was necessary to create spaces for awareness-raising with the stakeholders other than the older persons, in order to demonstrate the importance of a more horizontal way of working in which both power and decisions about the evaluation would be shared with the people for whom the service is intended. The aim was to make the advantages and the challenges of participatory evaluations tangible for all interested parties.

Bearing this approach in mind, each of the following blocks of work was developed:



The first steps of the design work presented major challenges because they took place entirely online. This meant connecting people located in three different countries: Ecuador, Costa Rica (the seat of the Focelac+ project) and Colombia, the country of residence of the facilitator contracted by Focelac+, whose role would include training the evaluation

team so that it became familiar with the theory and practice of the participatory evaluation approach, as well as facilitating and supporting the planning of the chosen participatory evaluation. In addition, the EvalParticipativa team, which would be in charge of the participatory evaluation training workshop, was based in Argentina.

The facilitator joined the meetings between Focelac+ and the SNP once it had been established that the intervention to be evaluated would be one run by the MIES. In this particular case, one advantage was her prior knowledge of Ecuador's National Evaluation System. Otherwise, it would have taken her more time to become adequately informed about the evaluation context in Ecuador.

In our experience, we consider it essential that the facilitator should not only have knowledge of the theoretical and methodological aspects of evaluation, but should also know and understand the particular context of the country. This is also why it was important to study carefully the relevant information about the Ministry's policy guidelines on programmes for older adults and, in particular, about the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces. Only after this did the facilitator put forward the proposed work plan for the PE design, since this exercise is understood as a garment that must be tailor-made to respond appropriately to the particular challenges that each participatory evaluation entails.

Mapping the stakeholders involved in the evaluation to be designed

Within the programming or design phase of a PE, the first stage concerns preparing and forming the evaluation team. To this end, an essential action was the mapping of the stakeholders involved in the evaluation and the definition of the entities that would

form part of the evaluation team and of the broader group (the individuals would be defined later).

The stakeholder mapping began with a brainstorming session on potential institutions to involve in the evaluation, considering their role or mandate, their influence on the programme and on the policy environment, and the potential use they would make of the evaluation. On this basis, priority was given to those stakeholders that might form part of the extended evaluation group.

Subsequently, from this list, the key stakeholders were analysed in order to form the evaluation team — that is, the one that would be more directly involved in its design and implementation—. To this end, the possibilities of involving various types of stakeholders were analysed, taking into account their potential interest and availability. Likewise, the essential characteristics that the delegated representatives should have were defined, in order to formally extend the invitation to take part in the PE process.

This exercise faced several complexities:

- it had to be done online;
- there was, as yet, no team designated as such by the Secretariat or by the Ministry, so it was unclear who was going to take part in the exercise;
- the methodology had initially been designed for a participatory exercise involving at least six people;
- in the end, only one person from each of the entities was able to take part —that is, two people—.

These circumstances left us with several lessons. The first is that the mapping can be done using collaborative working tools such as digital whiteboards—in this case Google Jamboard was used—but it requires the participants to have a detailed knowledge of the environment of the intervention to be evaluated. A multistakeholder perspective is always enriching and lies at the very heart of this type of stakeholder mapping; otherwise, it ends up looking more like an interview. Had time allowed, it would have been advisable to postpone the stakeholder mapping until a larger number of participants were available.

It had also been intended to disseminate the results of the mapping more widely with the relevant bodies of the Secretariat and the Ministry, but it was not possible to carry out this exercise with the rigour originally envisaged, as the day-to-day pressures within each of the institutions prevented it. So, simply as things went along, the mapping was presented to a few people and the decisions on the invitation to the PE training workshop were taken. Nevertheless, we believe that on future occasions it would be valuable to be able to analyse the stakeholder mapping more carefully.

PE training workshop

Strategically, it had been decided to run a course/workshop with EvalParticipativa to provide conceptual and methodological guidelines on PE, drawing on practical evidence. This would serve as the prelude to

the start of the PE design, seeking to bring to a common level the knowledge of the institutions identified in the stakeholder mapping that would form part of the broader group and the evaluation team.

During the operational planning of the workshop, a question arose about the best way to involve the older persons who were going to be part of the evaluation team. Having them attend five consecutive days of work sessions (first the training, and then the last two days to begin designing the evaluation) seemed excessive for them, as they are not used to this kind of exercise. Furthermore, they might have felt excluded from certain discussions, given that the other participants had experience in project management.

Consequently, it was decided that the older adults, and the people who work with them in the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces—known as facilitators—would not attend the training workshop, but would join for the final two days, when the PE design formally began. Experience showed that this decision was a sound one. Since the other people from the institutions already had the key notions about PE, the following days could focus on explaining, in simple terms, the central elements that the older persons needed to bear in mind as part of the evaluation team. In other words, the more technical part was already clear to everyone else, and the central objective was cohesion as a team, in line with one of the principles of participatory evaluation: that all people should join the evaluation process actively and consciously, as subjects of rights (Tapella et al., 2021).

Defining the evaluation team

As mentioned above, the stakeholder mapping concluded with the prioritisation of the entities that would form part of both the evaluation team and the broader group. The participation of the following was decided: public entities, academia, civil society organisations and, of course, the population for whom the service is intended and the entities in charge.

Once the institutions had been identified, formal communications were sent to them from the SNP as the governing body for evaluation in Ecuador. The letters therefore had a dual character: on the one hand persuasive, in explaining the importance of being part of the process—which would be a pioneering initiative in PE from within the public sector in the country—but, on the other hand, they made clear the authority with which they were being called upon (in the case of the public entities).

The composition of the evaluation team underwent an unforeseen expansion, as a result of the commitment and interest shown by the representatives of three entities that took part in the PE training workshop and that had been expected to be only in the broader group. Thus, the Ministry of Public Health, the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador and the National Council for Intergenerational Equality joined the design work in full. As a result, the evaluation team came to be made up of these three entities, the representatives of the user population (six in total), the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion and the National Planning Secretariat.

The representatives of the older population were all women, as will be explained later.

Reflections and lessons from forming the evaluation team

It is important to be flexible in defining the evaluation team, since the stakeholder mapping allows for a first approximation, but there are many other human factors at play that can turn into opportunities. Thus, for example, in our case, having conducted the PE workshop revealed the genuine interest of the people from three entities (initially considered only for the broader group and not for the evaluation team), which led us to decide to invite them to take an active part in the PE design. In addition, the judgement and background of two of them—being geriatricians—proved strategic, since the team did not include anyone else with that specific training.

Another important aspect in forming the evaluation team concerned the integration of the representatives of the older population. Although the selection process did not proceed as originally planned, it was important to visit them directly at their meeting places before beginning the joint work.

To explain the reasons why the selection could not be carried out as planned (by means of a participatory exercise), it is important to go back to the time when the stakeholder mapping was done. At that point, the people from the Secretariat and the Ministry were only just getting to know one another, and a dynamic

of joint work had not yet been established. The consultant, for her part, did not personally know any of the people with whom she was going to work. Most of the meetings were held online.

It is sometimes easy to forget that starting a new process of interinstitutional work takes time. It is not just a matter of formalities, but of establishing relationships of trust that allow for greater fluidity in communication and decision-making. In keeping with the spirit of this being participatory and inclusive work, it had been thought that, in a mutual familiarisation activity, the service users at the three centres would democratically propose those they wished to delegate to be part of the team, and that the judgement of the people who work there and of the Ministry would also be drawn upon in taking the final decision. However, what happened was that the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces had already gone ahead and chosen two representatives for each centre, and the Ministry communicated this to the Secretariat.

Consequently, it was already a decision taken, and the result was six women, although a mixed composition of the team would have been interesting. Nonetheless, the visit made to the care centres was very important as a first point of contact for building trust with the older women who would be part of the evaluation team. From that moment on, even sharing a dance became essential for getting close to them, since it is one of their favourite activities. In a way, this marked a milestone at which it became clear to us as a team that it was important to keep pace with them so that we could all dance to the same rhythm.

Initial workshop for designing the participatory evaluation

This was, without any doubt, the decisive phase in the design of the evaluation and the greatest challenge for the facilitator. The great challenge was to create the conditions for horizontal work within the evaluation team, seeking cohesion as a group and a common goal: to achieve a good PE design that would help improve the service for the older women, and not focus solely on the three cases selected as a pilot.

In other words, the challenges were not only methodological —having relevant objectives and pertinent evaluation questions— but also reaching them with the involvement of the whole team, which had a heterogeneous composition. The aim was for no one to be left behind: that we could all keep step so that the results would genuinely be the fruit of joint work, with each person contributing from their own position and experience, so that the different perspectives were valued. At the same time, the aim was to overcome any institutional disagreements that might arise.

With these challenges on our shoulders, the methodological guide was designed for the two days of the workshop in which the backbone of the evaluation would be defined. It was essential to reach agreement within that time on the content and meaning of the evaluation objectives, the guiding questions and an outline of what the information sources and the tools for obtaining it might be. Owing to the budget

constraints of the consultancy supporting the design, only two trips by the facilitator were envisaged, each lasting five days, for in-person work. It was therefore essential to finish the workshop with these outputs, since afterwards, working online, it would no longer be possible to count on the participation of all the stakeholders. The second trip was to work on designing the evaluation instruments in person.

Four assumptions underpinned the methodological proposal for the workshop:

1. Working with the human factors to achieve genuine cohesion as a team was essential, and for this the symbolic elements had to carry decisive weight. Each activity was conceived not only in terms of its methodological aspects but also in terms of what it might mean symbolically for the participants, especially the older women.
2. Using simple language and analogies to explain the central but complex matters that needed to be defined in the design of the evaluation. This would help ensure that the older women (with little formal education) understood what was being done and why.
3. Working inductively to define the evaluation objectives and questions, focusing on what is to be evaluated in a participatory way and for what purpose: the starting point would not be the evaluation criteria.
4. Prioritising that everyone on the evaluation team had clear ideas about what the backbone of the

evaluation would be. The formulation of the evaluation objectives and questions in technical language would be completed afterwards. It was not a matter of drafting it all together, but it would be ensured that the essence was preserved because it had been a collective agreement. The objectives would be presented in two forms: in simple language and in technical language.

To explain how these basic assumptions, on which the workshop would be run, were gradually fleshed out, it is important to present the key moments and some of the activities that were defined for the work of those two days.

- **The preliminary phase:** this involved providing context on PE work to the senior managers of the Secretariat and the Ministry, and to the older women and their companions. The aim was to raise awareness among the managers regarding the importance of sharing decisions about the evaluation with the members of the evaluation team, including the older women, in pursuit of horizontality. It also aimed to design the methodology for communicating the key notions of PE to the older women in a clear and simple way.
- **Introduction of participants and team building:** the objective of this moment was to facilitate everyone's integration, bearing in mind that some people had been working together for the previous three days and others were only just joining, with the aim of ensuring that the older women felt warmly welcomed and valued.

- **Participation begins at home — the cohesion of the evaluation team:** the aim was to anchor the notion of participation in an experiential exercise, from each person's perspective, taking into account their different roles and therefore different viewpoints. Diversity enriches the exercise of participatory evaluation, so it was hoped that the team being formed would truly feel this way; to that end, it was important to listen to people from their own place/position in relation to the service to be evaluated and to come to understand the other person's point of view.
- **Contextualisation on the object of the evaluation:** this moment aimed to bring together the different views on the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces, clarifying any doubts about them and delimiting the object of evaluation as centred on the service as a whole and not on the three care units where it would be piloted.
- **Defining the essential elements of the evaluation objectives and their guiding questions:** work focused on what we wanted to investigate and for what purpose (use of the evidence/information) before going into the detail of the evaluation questions; as reaching agreements on the what and the why of the evaluation makes it easier to prioritise and no time is lost defining evaluation questions in relation to objectives that are ultimately not prioritised.
- **Approaching the information sources to address the evaluation questions and the types of tools to be used:** the aim was to provide simple answers to

questions such as: where might the information to answer this question be found? who has the answer? and how might the information be gathered?

Reflections and lessons from the initial PE design workshop

1. Symbolic elements foster conditions for horizontality in the relationships within the evaluation team, despite the diversity of stakeholders and their power asymmetries.

One of the central concerns in designing the methodology for the workshop was to create spaces that promoted horizontality within the evaluation team, which was meeting in full for the first time at that moment. Hence, the first activity for introducing the participants was thought through carefully to address our specific challenges. This led us to devising some simple but powerful symbols to convey that initial message.

It was important that the older women and their companions should feel welcome and included in the group from the very first moment. A personalised welcome was also devised: one of the longer standing people in the group introduced themselves and welcomed one of the newcomers, handing her the grey scarf and a jigsaw piece. This identified us as a team and made it possible, at the end, to reflect on the work we would be doing together, in which each person had something to contribute from their own uniqueness. The jigsaw pieces were of different colours but fitted together.

This activity, simple in appearance, had a greater effect on the older women than we had anticipated when we designed it. They expressed this in their evaluation of the session. It meant a recognition of their worth as persons and of the importance of their participation. It also made clear that it was neither necessary nor, indeed, appropriate to keep referring to hierarchies and titles.

Another of the initial exercises that had been designed to foster this team spirit on a more human level involved identifying, at a personal level, the fundamental aspects that would make each person feel truly included and taken into account in the PE design process. It was relevant to know this, since it lies at the very heart of PE that people should be genuinely valued for their diversity of knowledge and experience.

2. Recognising the importance of having professionals specialising in the specific subject being evaluated does not detract from the importance of a diverse evaluation team, once a good level of horizontality in decision-making has been achieved.

Having two geriatricians on the evaluation team was decisive. They helped to interpret —with professional precision— the needs identified by the rest of the team (including the older women) regarding the aspects that needed to be evaluated in order to have sufficient information for making decisions that would help improve the care service for the older population.

Participatory evaluation is sometimes confused with an evaluation carried out by the service users. Here the aim was to ensure that the different evaluation topics prioritised by the team were always taken into account, regardless of whether they were proposed by the service users or by specialised professionals. In other words, every effort was made to ensure that everyone on the team could explain sufficiently, and in a way that was comprehensible to all, the reasons why they considered it important to include a given aspect to be evaluated. Hence the importance of having both subject specialists on the team, as well as the intended recipients of the service.

3. Using analogies is helpful for expressing complex ideas in simple language. Defining them takes time, given the need to find the best way to do so clearly without losing rigour.

Previous PE experiences had shown that a frequent challenge is to convey clearly to the population taking part in the evaluation team —especially in the case of older women— that their role is as evaluators taking part from the design stage, not as key informants in an evaluation that is being implemented. It was essential to make these two aspects clear, since it is not usual for them to be called upon for purposes such as this and, therefore, for them it meant taking on a new role.

It is for this reason that, at the start of the workshop, analogies were used so that they would understand the point of evaluating something in order to improve

it, and how to frame the major issues concerning what to evaluate and why. In this way, by giving examples and asking questions, the facilitator made sure that they had understood the purpose of the work that the team would undertake over the following two days.

Technical language can often mask matters that are not fully understood in their most practical sense. Moreover, this initial approach set a tone for communication that sought to leave no one out of the matters under discussion. That is, even technical topics in gerontology or public policy needed to be explained clearly. Simple language does not necessarily mean a loss of rigour, and it does facilitate communication.

The choice of a methodological tool, of the language to be used or of the way of steering the design of a PE is not devoid of an ethical and philosophical stance on the significance of the participation of communities—generally marginalised ones—in these exercises. It is necessary to recognise the diversity of interests among the participating institutional stakeholders and the importance of genuinely listening to the voice of those representing the communities, so that they may have a say in the decisions taken within the evaluation team. This is also why the use of simple language is not merely a matter of form, but a communicative commitment that recognises the importance of debate on equal terms, which entails respect for people's ability to understand the topics under discussion.

4. Providing information, both quantitative and qualitative, to give context to the interventions to be evaluated allows the evaluation team to have common reference points drawn from diverse experiences.

One of the exercises on the morning of the first day of the workshop was precisely to share how the Socialisation and Encounter Spaces were seen from different perspectives. This was the key moment for understanding the viewpoint of the women using the services, of the people who work with the older adults, of the Ministry as the body responsible for the programme and thus, of each of the institutions that formed part of the team and had its own motivations and interests regarding the PE. Its purpose was to achieve as broad an understanding as possible of the perspectives of the different members of the team, without entering into discussions about the needs and difficulties in delivering the service.

We received a pleasant surprise several weeks later regarding the importance of this activity. The second time we met as a team, Estrellita, one of the older women, stood up with great confidence and explained to one of the authorities of the National Planning Secretariat why the PE we were designing was important, taking out her notebook, in which she had taken step-by-step notes during the workshop. She cited the exact number of Socialisation and Encounter Spaces that there were in Ecuador, explained why this PE was important and said that she had told her peers that this work was not only for their benefit but for

the whole country, because the aim was to improve the service. This, which was entirely spontaneous, filled us with joy and demonstrated that making those quantitative data known to the whole team also enabled the empowerment of the older women.

5. The decision to take an inductive approach to defining the objectives of the evaluation being designed had methodological reasons: to foster dialogue grounded in practice.

In the methodology of the initial PE design workshop, the proposal was not to begin with the evaluation criteria, but rather with defining what to evaluate and for what purpose as the basic structure of the objectives, which entails an approach to the use expected of the results. The reason for this was the value of the diverse experiences within the evaluation team and the need to engage in depth with those experiences without the bias of technical jargon, which can also prove exclusionary. That is, explaining what evaluation criteria are and beginning by defining them would have been too abstract for the service users and would not really have added value. On the contrary, it would somewhat have broken the flexibility afforded by approaching, more freely, an understanding of the stakeholders' perspective from their own particular experience, in terms of what to evaluate and why.

When we speak of experiences, we are not referring only to subjectivity or to the emotional perception of an intervention. Experience encompasses in

itself the knowledge and expertise of the field of the intervention (in this case, gerontological care for the older population); the understanding of the needs that are identified; and the vision of the changes required. Thus, the aim was to draw out not only the lived experience of the women using the service, but also the professional experience of those who accompany them, of the geriatricians, of the people responsible for public policy in Ecuador and of each member of the evaluation team, with a view to defining a PE framework that would help deliver a service well suited to the older population.

Bringing different forms of knowledge about reality into dialogue, on the basis of diverse experiences, does not mean that technical knowledge and local or traditional knowledge come into conflict. What matters is that joint work is placed at the service of contextualised action, in order to take advantage of the opportunities of the environment with a view to resolving specific problems. In this sense, PE plays a strategic role in achieving a broad understanding of the reality on which an intervention or service acts, and in fostering empowerment for its transformation.

Guaranteeing the participation of service users in the design of a PE involves precisely those same mechanisms that are mentioned in connection with social innovation networks: that it should be an opportunity for empowerment and that it should genuinely contribute to defining central aspects in terms of their needs, so that the evidence the evaluation yields is socially useful.

None of this argument means that, in a PE, it is not possible to define evaluation criteria first and to derive the questions from them. Each case is unique and, if it has been determined in advance that the evaluation should focus only on certain specific criteria, then that is how it should be done; but it would be necessary to explain sufficiently the reasons why it should focus on those criteria, and thus set the boundaries, so as to know what terrain one is moving in and not raise matters that cannot be addressed in the PE.

6. The essence of participatory work is that the backbone, or the substantive definitions, should genuinely be built on the contributions of everyone involved.

In the case of designing a PE, it is essential that these agreements concern the object of the evaluation, its objectives and the evaluation questions. Defining this general structure of the PE was the expected output of the initial design workshop: this was no small challenge, precisely because what mattered was not only having the structure, but how it was arrived at—with the active and conscious participation of the whole evaluation team—. And this in a context in which most of the people were not familiar with evaluation matters.

To achieve this, various activities were designed that always included highly visual elements in order to gradually assemble what this structure would be. Likewise, at each step, ways of presenting and

validating what was being defined were established, so that all participants could become familiar with one another's work, make their contributions and, in the end, group together similar ideas in order to prioritise the central topics.

One of the lessons left by this whole process is that it is better to have shorter working sessions that are close together in time. In this way, greater depth is achieved as there is less fatigue, and neither the track of our progress nor the momentum is lost.

Throughout the initial PE design exercise, some sessions of differentiated work were arranged for the older women and for the institutional representatives. This was done because it is important to bear in mind in which aspects it is essential for the whole evaluation team to take part—as these involve substantive decisions—and in which it is not necessary, and the particular expertise or knowledge of some members of the team is required instead.

The way of communicating to different stakeholders the central aspects of the PE that was being defined was a challenge not limited to the older women in their communities. A fundamental aspect of preserving the essence of the PE while ensuring it reaches decision-makers who will utilise the evaluation findings is precisely the language used to communicate the evaluation objectives and their entire technical structure.

Generally, it is necessary to use both technical language and simple language that allows the communities

using the services to genuinely understand what is going to be done, the reasons for it and the usefulness it may have. If only one of the two registers is used, the possibility of reaching a strategic group of stakeholders effectively will be lost. One example of how both types of language can be used is that of the specific objectives of this PE. Their final formulation was reviewed by the whole evaluation team to confirm that all the aspects collectively prioritised during the initial workshop had been retained.

In technical language, specific objective: *to determine the contribution of the socio-educational projects to active and healthy ageing in accordance with the comprehensive individual gerontological assessment.*

In simple language: *what do we want to find out? How much do the activities they take part in help each person to have an active and healthy life?*

One of the lessons learned from this experience was the importance of involving the institutional communications teams at key moments of the PE design from the outset, and not merely for the purpose of reporting. Although this had not been envisaged in the methodology designed for the initial workshop, it was incorporated as things went along, at the suggestion of the National Planning Secretariat.

This point is essential, since it fosters the understanding and commitment of the communications staff to the process as a whole, especially with a view to the use of the PE results. Their involvement meant taking part in some of the group exercises and at strategic moments

in the plenary sessions, enabling them to interact with the evaluation team and make questions and contributions. They analysed, from a communications standpoint, the importance of this process within the field of public policy evaluation in Ecuador, and they regard it as a point of reference for positioning it in various settings with strategic stakeholders.

On future occasions, it would be advisable to explicitly consider bringing in the communications teams of the main institutions involved in the PE being designed.

The purpose of the initial workshop was achieved once a consensus had been reached within the evaluation team on the content and prioritisation of the aspects to be considered in the PE objectives and their associated evaluation questions. Likewise, an initial outline was established of potential information sources and tools for gathering it.

The workshop left not only outputs in terms of the content of the PE design: it also left a cohesive evaluation team with a deep commitment to ensuring that suitable care can be provided to older persons through the use of the evidence the PE yields.

There is no doubt that the human factor was decisive in achieving the intended results. Work such as this does not depend solely on the technical capabilities of the participants, nor on their knowledge and experience of the subject in question. All of that is insufficient if the team does not manage to work as harmoniously and horizontally as possible.

The closing of the workshop bore this out. Many feelings and deeply moving expressions surfaced about what the workshop had meant for the participants. The women in particular (not only the older women) highlighted how it had been a way of reaffirming their worth. For some female officials, getting their bosses to accept the time they devoted to the workshop amounted to a test of strength in terms of power struggles in order to assert the importance of what was to be worked on. The older women, for their part, expressed emphatically that they had felt valued, recognised and deeply happy to be *useful*.

All of this leads to the conclusion that the process of designing a PE has unforeseen results connected with a more human dimension that is as important as the technical aspects.

Designing the evaluation instruments

With the good results of the initial PE design workshop and the certainty of having an evaluation team united around a single purpose, we embarked on the following phases of the PE design, which involved both online and in-person work. The tasks were divided mainly between the Secretariat and the Ministry as the entities responsible for the process and, only afterwards, at the in-person session to design the instruments, did the whole evaluation team meet again.

The second in-person meeting of the whole evaluation team was a week-long workshop to design the evaluation instruments. Beforehand, work had already been done online to identify the most appropriate information sources and tools for gathering the information. In this workshop the older women worked specifically on the qualitative instruments that would be applied in the communities (interviews and games). They did so guided by some of the professionals on the evaluation team.

The other members of the evaluation team focused on designing the other instruments. Methodologically, it was decided that the work would proceed in the following order:

1. Defining instruments for each of the specific objectives, taking into account their associated evaluation questions.
2. Grouping the instruments by type of stakeholder (for example: Ministry authorities, zonal analysts, experts, community leaders).
3. Institutional instruments already available (for example, nutritional assessment, gerontological assessment).

The distribution into working groups for designing the instruments was determined on the basis of the specific training and experience of each member of the evaluation team. However, crosschecks were always carried out in order to gain a broader view and to add or remove whatever was necessary. This was a long and rigorous piece of work that involved significant learning

for the team, primarily in combining qualitative and quantitative methods. It was truly rewarding to observe the respect and interest with which doubts about one method or another were exchanged, according to each person's experience and knowledge.

Organising and refining the instruments was a subsequent task carried out by a smaller team, but during that week of in-person work substantial progress was made in defining the instruments.

Reflections and lessons from designing the evaluation instruments

Rigour is important in preserving the meaning of the agreements reached collectively regarding the evaluation questions, since it is easy to distort it when defining the evaluation instruments.

For this reason, the work done at the initial PE design workshop was always kept as a point of reference, so that it was possible to go back and check the exact way in which the ideas had originally been expressed on the posters. Likewise, work was based on matrices in which the objectives and questions were rigorously listed, in order to know what each instrument is intended to account for. In this way, everything was duly tied together, with a precise nomenclature that made it possible to trace which objective and evaluation question each instrument responds to.

Another of the challenges of this phase of work concerned designing instruments for gathering information that appropriately combined qualitative and quantitative methods, while also making the best possible use of the available institutional information.

Ensuring that the findings of a PE are actually used in the field of public policy requires bearing in mind the type of information needed and the purpose of it. PE focuses on the benefit it may represent for the communities to which an intervention is directed, and improving the programme or service is a means to that end.

Drafting the dissemination document

The final stage of the PE design was the drafting of a document that would gather the results of the collective work and enable different stakeholders to understand the importance of carrying out the evaluation. This was strategic, bearing in mind that a few weeks later the new government team of the newly elected president would take office, and it was very likely that the authorities and technical staff who were already involved in the PE design process would not remain in their posts.

The core content of the PE design was disseminated to the population using the service at the three units selected as a pilot. In this activity, the older women

on the evaluation team played the leading role, accompanied by the other members of the team.

Dissemination within the public entities could only be done directly by the members of the evaluation team with their managers and the relevant authorities, given that at the end of the year Ecuador was in the phase of transition and handover to the new government, and conditions were not in place to hold a dissemination event.

Reflections and lessons from drafting the document

Throughout the entire process in finalising the objectives and questions, as well as in defining the evaluation instruments and drafting the final document, the work done at the initial design workshop was always kept as a point of reference, so that it was possible to go back and check the exact way in which the ideas had been expressed.

The facilitator took on the responsibility of ensuring that this was so, drawing on methodological tools for the purpose, but also constantly recalling that precision in language is fundamental to preserving the meaning of what was agreed. That is, when drafting in technical terms, taking rigorous care not to introduce matters of particular interest (whether personal or institutional). This oversight role is easier for an external person acting as facilitator.

Frequently, in this type of exercise, the people responsible for drafting the text may end up altering matters over which there had been lengthy discussions in order to reach a precise consensus. The final drafting is not merely a technical matter: it is, above all, an ethical responsibility to preserve the polyphony of voices that form part of the PE, since there is no point in having a good design workshop that is truly participatory if, in the end, the document does not respect the agreements reached.

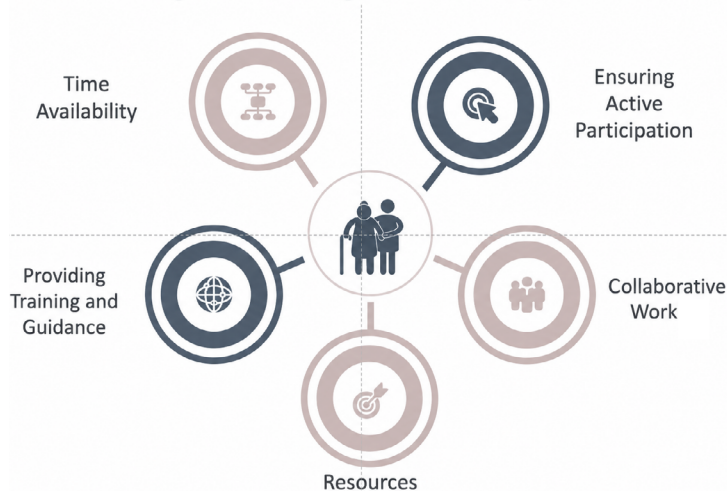
The challenges that lie ahead

The completion of the PE design was a fundamental achievement in demonstrating the importance of this type of evaluation in Ecuador and the potential that exists to make use of its findings for the benefit of the population using services defined within the framework of public policy.

It is important to stress that, in many countries — including Ecuador — the mistake is made of establishing public services for citizens without considering the needs of the service users as expressed by the users themselves. This can be remedied through evaluation, since evaluation processes make it possible to detect this kind of gap, generate improvements for the benefit of citizens and strengthen the capacities of the teams in the subject evaluated.

A significant challenge in constructing the design was the time availability of the people who make up the evaluation team, most of them public officials with multiple duties to fulfil besides the participatory evaluation. Ensuring active participation has undoubtedly been the greatest of the challenges, since this goes hand in hand with the collaborative work of all individuals and with resources — not only human but also financial — and it will continue to be so on the road that lies ahead.

Challenges faced during the evaluation process



A key factor is the flexibility and capacity for adaptation that the members of the evaluation team must have in order to:

- face the situations that arise;
- bring together the diversity of stakeholders and their different points of view;

- complement the proposals that emerge; and
- foster and enhance the involvement of the various authorities and technical staff, as a key factor alongside the commitment and the political and technical backing of the initiative.

Special attention should be given to the empowerment of the evaluation team, particularly among the direct beneficiaries of the service, in an exercise that involves capturing all the voices in the evaluation design, setting aside titles and positions, and allowing us to get to know one another as people and as human beings.

Once the PE design had been completed, the next challenge was to create favourable conditions for carrying out the evaluation the following year, with a new national government in place. Hence there were challenges such as:

- Securing the interest of the new authorities in moving forward with the evaluation and their willingness to consider the recommendations arising from it, as an opportunity to make use of evidence-based information.
- Maintaining the interest of everyone taking part in this PE, both in the evaluation team and in the broader group. Likewise, achieving an appropriate coordination and a common level of understanding with the new people who join, as a result of the changes of public officials under the new government.
- Finalising the design of the instruments for information-gathering directly with the user population, as this involves creating thinking games and recreational activities; and piloting them.

- Continuing with a *learning-by-doing* approach in the process of strengthening capacities within the entities involved in the PE. This also involves preparing for the application of the data-collection instruments and the processing and analysis of the data. Likewise, defining clearly how the older persons will take part in this phase of the work, in accordance with their potential and characteristics.
- Continuing to promote interest in PE within the National Evaluation System, so that it can be replicated in other public interventions.

Despite the magnitude of these challenges, the PE design process provided the certainty of being able to count on people and entities genuinely committed to making it a reality, and that was a fundamental starting point for beginning the implementation phase of the evaluation with good prospects.

Summary of lessons learned

The challenge that remains is to implement the evaluation designed in a participatory way — something that has involved a great deal of technical and human work, which we regard as merely the beginning of a path of improvement for other public interventions through participatory evaluation—. To this end, it seems important to us to summarise and group together our reflections and lessons learned in the course of developing the design of this PE.

- The composition and selection of the members of the evaluation team is fundamental to a good design. Ideally, it is best to have not only the direct knowledge of those who use the service (depending on the intervention), but also people who are involved in its operation and in the definition of strategies and policy directions, as well as professionals specialising in the subject in question.
- Recognising the importance of having professionals who specialise in the specific subject being evaluated does not detract from the importance of a diverse composition of the evaluation team when a good level of horizontality in decision-making has been achieved.
- Symbolic elements create the conditions for horizontality in the relationships within the evaluation team, despite the diversity of stakeholders and their power asymmetries.
- Providing information, both quantitative and qualitative, to give context to the interventions to be evaluated allows the evaluation team to have common reference points drawn from diverse experiences.
- Levelling knowledge about PE must take into account the particularities of the different stakeholders. Participation does not mean that everyone is involved in the same activities at all times, but rather that they understand the process and have the opportunity to contribute from their own experience, taking part in the central decisions.
- A PE is not necessarily only qualitative; indeed, it is advisable for it to combine quantitative aspects

too. Nor should it be confused with an evaluation carried out by the user population. Its participatory character refers to including different types of stakeholders with the power to make decisions over its central aspects. It is therefore not just a matter of listening to the voice of the communities or the voice of the institutions: it is like a choir, where what matters is that there is harmony in the whole, even if at times some solos need to be heard and the accompanying instruments are varied.

- The decision to take an inductive approach to defining the objectives of the evaluation being designed had methodological reasons: to foster a dialogue grounded in practice. The essence of participatory work is that the backbone, or the substantive definitions, should genuinely be built on the contributions of everyone involved and that a consensus should be reached. In the case of designing a PE, it is essential that these agreements concern the object of the evaluation, its objectives and the evaluation questions. Working in a participatory way does not mean that everyone must work together all the time, but rather that they are taken into account in the central decisions, that the agreements reached are respected, and that information is communicated in a way that is comprehensible to all.

- It is advisable to explicitly consider bringing in the communications teams of the main institutions involved in the PE being designed, for the sake of more effective communication within the entities and of external visibility.
- Using analogies is helpful for expressing complex ideas in simple language. Defining them takes time, given the need to find the best option for doing so clearly without compromising rigour.
- The human factor was decisive in achieving the intended results. Work such as this does not depend solely on the technical capabilities of the participants, nor on their knowledge and experience of the subject in question. All of that is insufficient if the team does not manage to work as harmoniously and horizontally as possible. But achieving this does not depend only on “technical” aspects: it is essential that there be empathy and human closeness, since at the essence of the participatory approach lies an ethical commitment and a vision of a more inclusive and equitable society.
- The process of designing a PE has unforeseen results connected with a more human dimension that is as important as the technical aspects.

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