

Chapter 11

Lessons from the Practice of Inclusive Rigour in Evaluating a Peace Initiative in Colombia

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Abstract

In this chapter, we present a participatory evaluation experience of a peace initiative in Colombia, utilizing the Inclusive Rigour framework. This initiative compared the implementation of Systemic Action Research (SAR) with a capacity-building process conducted with three Territorial Councils for Peace, Reconciliation, and Coexistence. Systemic Action Research is, in itself, a process of generating collective knowledge and learning; therefore, its evaluation ended up being configured as an evaluative learning process within another collective action-learning process. The evaluation was a participatory process centered on learning, with an iterative design that included adapted components of the systematization of experiences and outcome harvesting. Although it initially began oriented by theories and inquiries from external actors and peace literature (thus initially following a theory-based evaluation approach), it evolved toward a transformative evaluation process. This experience illustrates how genuine participation enriches both the quality and utility of the evaluation while highlighting its inherent challenges and tensions. Evaluating from Inclusive Rigour framework requires constant and open dialogues that translate flexibility, sensitivity, and a commitment to social transformation into collaborative designs, analyses, and adaptations that harmonize diverse interests. We invite readers to reimagine evaluation as a space for collective construction and continuous learning to navigate the complexities of these processes.

Keywords

Inclusive Rigour, Participation, Evaluation, Learning, Systemic.

Citation

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Introduction

Peacebuilding interventions and their evaluations take place in dynamic and potentially volatile contexts, marked by complex relationships involving many people in different roles. These contexts do not follow stable trajectories and often experience unpredictable changes in their dynamics, patterns, and structural conditions. In addition, peacebuilding is intrinsically political work, shaped by factors across local, national, and global levels, which makes it difficult to identify, define, or measure impact and the contribution of actions and organisations.

As a result, the multi-causal pathways through which peacebuilding interventions generate outcomes are emergent and highly relational. This means most attempts to measure predefined results are ineffective, or they do not capture the valuable unplanned or emerging transformations taking place. Peacebuilding programmes need to interact with diverse people and organisations in the system, which means that their evaluations bring forms of engagement embedded in power dynamics. That is why we must intentionally design, deploy, and orient evaluations in accordance with relational logics aligned with peacebuilding itself, thereby facilitating the navigation of those relationships.

In this chapter we present a participatory evaluation experience of a peacebuilding initiative developed in Colombia. The peace initiative evaluated was a pilot comparing the implementation of Systemic Action

Research (SAR) with a capacity-building process, carried out in the department of Cauca, Colombia, with three Territorial Councils for Peace, Reconciliation and Coexistence. Since Systemic Action Research is inherently a collective knowledge-generation and learning process, its evaluation ultimately becomes an evaluative learning process embedded within another collective action-learning process.

The evaluation was a participatory, learning-centred process with an iterative design. It included components adapted from the systematisation of experiences and outcome harvesting. Although the evaluation initially drew on peace literature and external actors' questions (therefore initially aligned with theory-based evaluation), it shifted towards becoming a transformative evaluation process.

In addition to pointing out the key milestones of the participatory evaluation, we seek to highlight the insights gained from the participatory evaluation and share what we learned using the Inclusive Rigour framework. In doing so, we invite more people from Latin America and the Caribbean to join the collaborative conversation maintained by the group now called the Inclusive Rigour Co-Lab.

We consider our Latin American context a fertile and crucial ground for the framework's continued adaptation, and we believe the framework has the potential to help promote an evaluation culture with participation at the center—not only for ethical, political, and practical reasons, but also because participation is central to an expanded understanding of rigour—.

Brief context of peace and participation in Colombia

Colombia has a history of internal armed conflict that is usually traced back to the 1960s, with the emergence of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), but which can more broadly be traced back to the early years of national foundation (Sánchez, 2007; LeGrand, 2016). The signing and ratification in 2016 of the Final Peace Agreement to end the conflict and build a stable and lasting peace between the Colombian government and the FARC was a milestone in the country's history, as well as in the global history of negotiated peace agreements of armed conflicts.

That Peace Agreement defined peace in a positive sense, as the consolidation of relationships between people, groups, and institutions in which citizen participation is fundamental—not only in consultation and planning processes, but also in their implementation and follow-up. In line with this, Colombia has pursued a peacebuilding approach that gives an important role to participation and inclusion. To pursue the necessary shift in how different actors relate to one another, numerous mechanisms and spaces for citizen participation have been promoted, adjusted, and repositioned.

One of the renewed bodies was the Territorial Councils for Peace, Reconciliation and Coexistence (hereafter the Peace Councils). These formal spaces for citizen

participation are relevant because they were the focus of the initiative whose evaluation we describe in this document. Although the Councils have existed in the country since 1998, it was only in 2017 (in the context of the 2016 Peace Agreement) that they were backed by presidential directives. At that point, mayors and governors were tasked with creating and promoting them and setting aside resources for their functioning, so that they could fulfil their purpose: to 'promote the achievement and maintenance of peace, and facilitate harmonious collaboration among State entities and institutions [...] in order to achieve social relationships that ensure a permanent, comprehensive peace' (Decree, Law 885 of 2017).

It is also important to highlight that, alongside Colombia's deeply rooted pro-participation discourse and actions, there is a tension with the limited effectiveness of existing spaces for participation. This has led to fatigue among social leaders and civil movements, and even to indifference among many citizens regarding possibilities for influence or involvement in change, since these participation processes often end up being more formal than transformative (Tovar, 2019). The Territorial Councils for Peace, Reconciliation and Coexistence, as formal participation bodies, have not escaped this reality: at municipal level, the vast majority play a secondary role in territorial peacebuilding, have no funding for their operation, and are dependent on the will of local governments and/or the presence of international cooperation support (PARES, 2023).

The initiative to evaluate: *Co-Inspira*

Against this backdrop, two national government bodies —the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace (responsible for supporting and strengthening the Councils) and the Agency for Territorial Renewal (responsible for facilitating implementation of Territorial Development Plans)— sought to work together to strengthen the Territorial Councils for Peace, Reconciliation and Coexistence so they could fulfil their mission under the Peace Agreement’s implementation, with support from international cooperation (Management Systems International, which administered USAID).

Adapt Peacebuilding, a non-profit organisation that had been working in the country for more than five years using systemic methodologies, proposed a pilot project to work with the Councils and compare two methodologies: one focused on capacity development (dialogue and planning) and another, new in Colombia: Systemic Action Research (SAR), a form of Participatory Action Research (Burns, 2007). Humanity United, a private non-profit organisation, co-financed the process, and supported the project’s learning component. Named *Co-Inspira* by its participants, the pilot was carried out in two phases, one for each methodology.

The first phase took place in three Peace Councils, corresponding to the municipalities of Tumaco in the department of Nariño, Cáceres in Antioquia, and

El Tambo in Cauca. It consisted of implementing a more ‘traditional’ capacity-strengthening approach: training in dialogue and accompanying workshops to participatorily co-create the Councils’ action plans.

The second phase consisted of continuing the work in only one of the three Peace Councils, in El Tambo, where a Systemic Action Research (SAR) process was implemented. SAR is a methodology that generates multi-causal understandings of the existing dynamics in the system one wishes to transform, starting from the life stories of the community or communities to which the co-researchers belong. From there, the communities and co-researchers co-create action plans that are carried out through iterative action learning cycles. (Burns, 2007; Burns, Howard, and Ospina 2021; Gray and Burns, 2021). This was the first implementation of the methodology in Colombia and the third in the global peacebuilding context (Gray and Burns, 2021; Hicks, et al., 2024).

Although the pilot led to the continuation of an initiative that is still under implementation today, this text focuses only on the evaluation experience of the pilot (with its two phases). The evaluation should therefore be understood as a comparative process of two different peacebuilding approaches centred on the Peace Councils. In doing so, it is important to remember that one of them —SAR— is itself a participatory process of generating local collective knowledge, led by participants (known as co-researchers).

In *Co-Inspira*, the people initially convened for the first phase were all those who were part of the Peace

Councils in the three municipalities. Once the SAR approach was explained in El Tambo, one of the first decisions in participatory planning was that the space would be open: co-researchers could invite anyone, and anyone could join, provided they agreed to contribute to progress rather than restart or undo what had already been built. They also agreed that the knowledge generated would be freely accessible and usable, as long as it could be shared in a way that did not put those involved at risk.

The SAR began from a genuine question of the co-researchers, in this case: how peace is built in their territory. To answer it, they collected life stories from community members (with as wide a range of roles as possible) and analysed them to generate multi-

causal loops. When connected, these loops produced a map that shows the relational patterns of how the system works—the peacebuilding system in the territory—based on those stories. Figure 1 shows the map generated by the co-researchers in El Tambo, while Figure 2 presents, by way of example, one of the mapped dynamics.

Once the co-researchers connected the circular dynamics (loops) and created the map showing how peace is built in El Tambo—what builds or inhibits peace in their territory—they analysed the map in terms of opportunities for change and ‘frozen’ dynamics, and prioritised the opportunities that mattered most to them using criteria they chose, around their initial question.

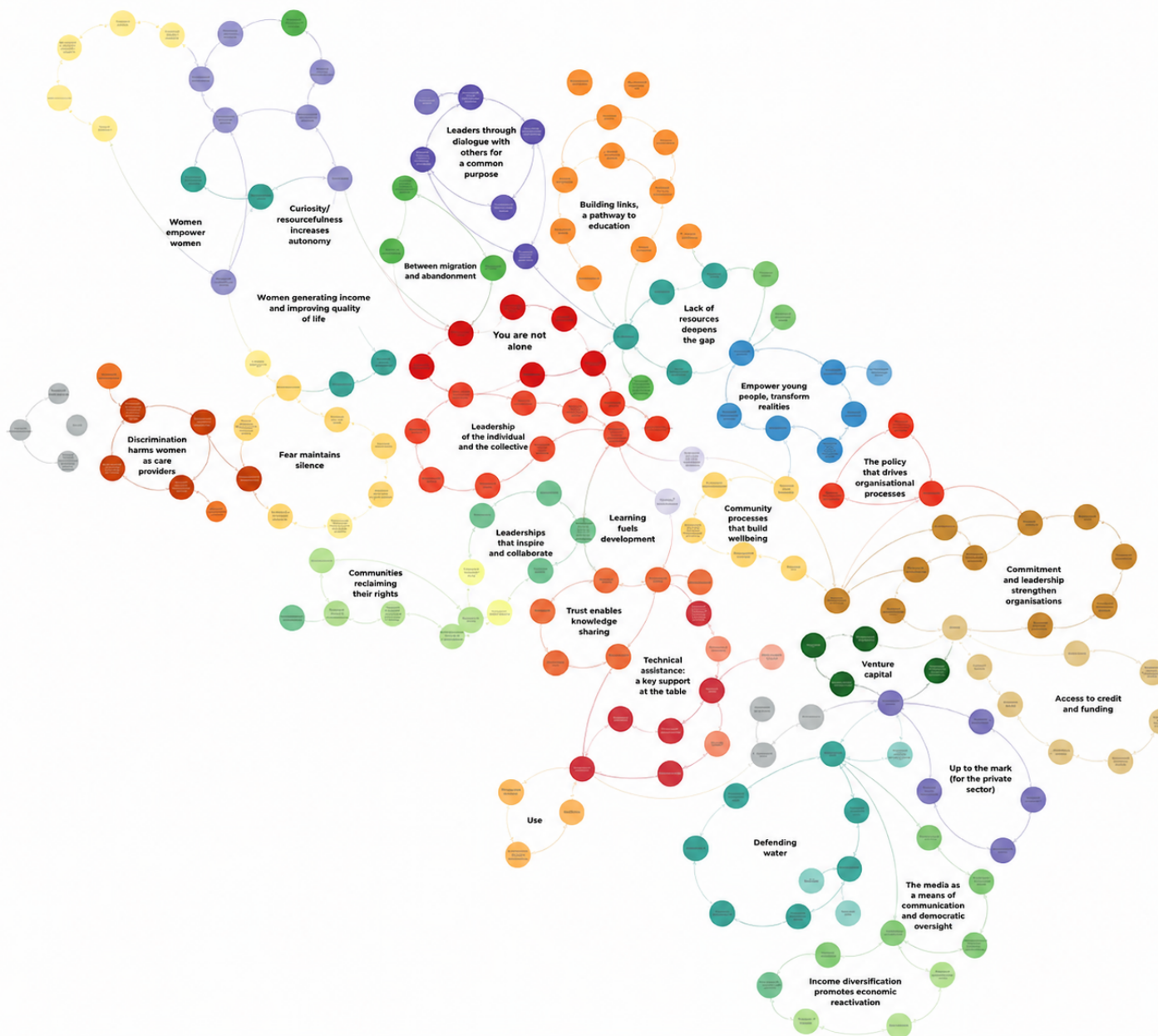


Figure 1. Complete map: How is peace built in our municipality? (Co-Inspira, 2021)

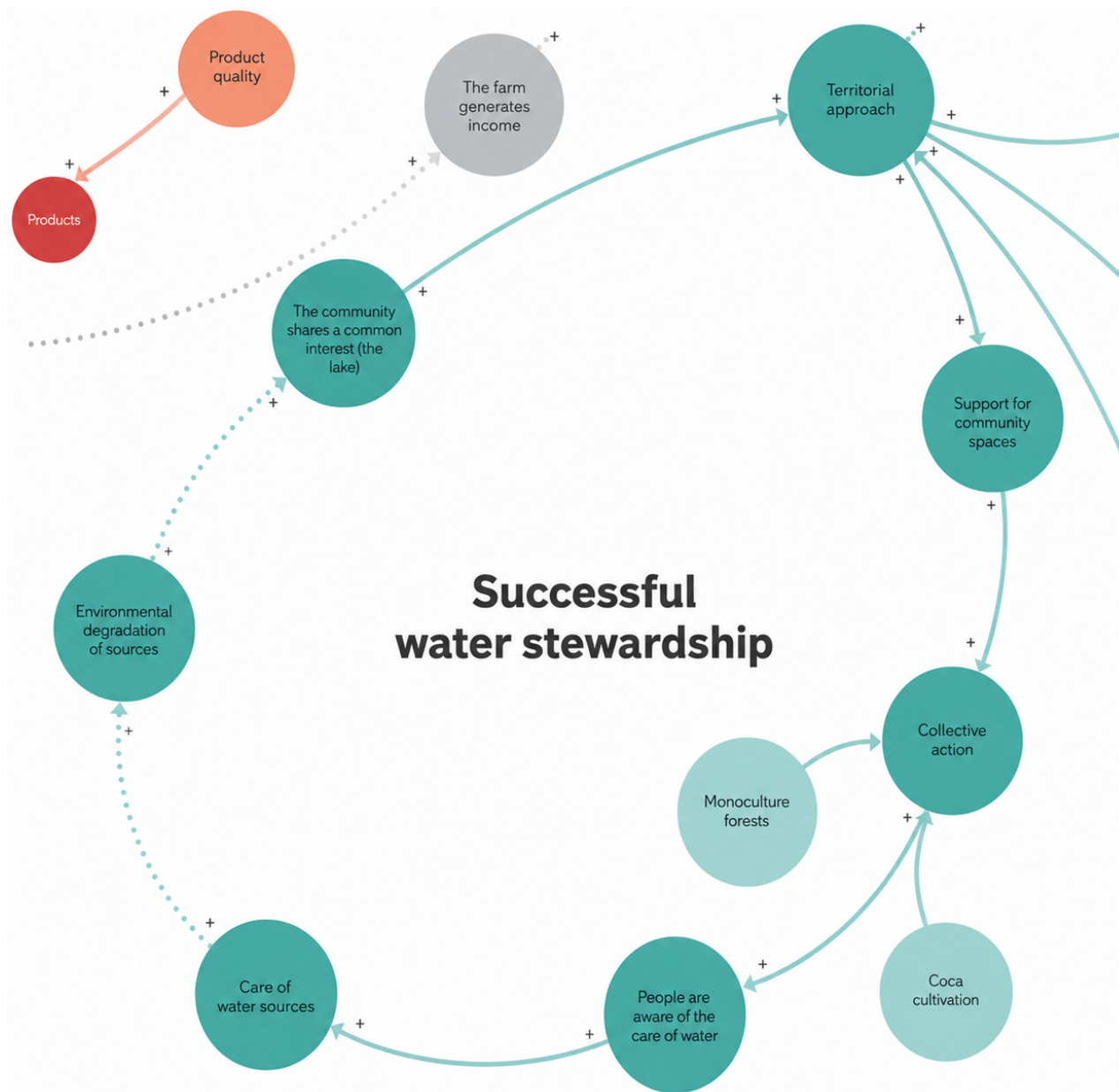


Figure 2. *Dynamic: “Successful Water Defense Dynamic (Co-Inspira, 2021)*

Afterwards, drawing on the collective knowledge generated, the co-researchers organised themselves into action learning circles around some of the opportunities identified. In those circles, they created theories of change to develop actions towards the transformations each group selected. They then began Action Learning cycles, including budget decisions and periodic adaptations of their theories of change.

Phase 2 of the pilot resulted in three action learning circles focused on protecting water and the environment; women's empowerment; and promoting youth leadership.

The evaluation process

The evaluation of the pilot sought to answer how and to what extent the use of SAR within a local peace council contributed to creating collective and relational agency with the potential to transform power relations in the territory. This was approached through comparison of the two methodologies, while also collecting lessons learned from the pilot experience for working with Peace Councils and strengthening them.

As a result, the evaluation —focused on learning— became an 'oxymoron' of two use needs: one informed by literature (with an explicit theory), seeking to learn about the scope and limitations of SAR compared with more common approaches; and another without an explicit theoretical foundation, aiming to learn from local experience. Both converged on the question of how to contribute more effectively to peacebuilding from the grassroots, making clear that what counted as 'effective' should be defined by the community.

The evaluation consisted of three main activities: a baseline, a process of systematisation of experiences, and an adapted (lighter) version of outcome harvesting. A timeline is provided to help situate the process in time.

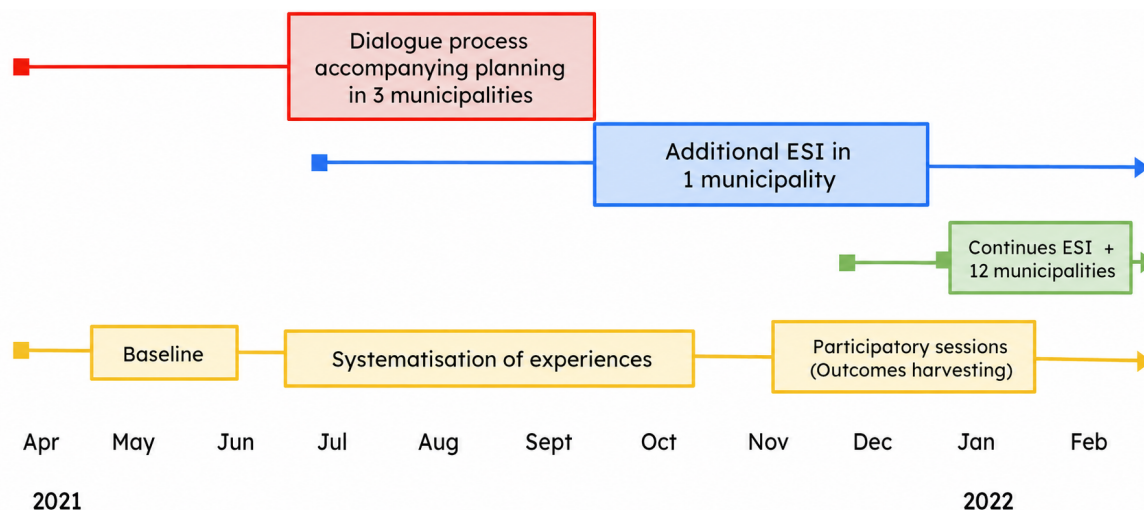


Figure 3. *Co-Inspira timeline*

Perspectives and initial questions

The overall proposal for the evaluation component of the Co-Inspira pilot was developed before implementation began. The pilot was possible thanks to a shared interest in learning about peacebuilding methodologies and approaches in the context of Peace Agreement implementation, held by the two national government agencies, the designer-implementer (Adapt Peacebuilding), and Humanity United as a co-funder.

Adapt Peacebuilding and Humanity United’s learning interests focused on peace initiatives in the Peace Agreement implementation context and on differences between methodological approaches (SAR vs capacity

strengthening). This led to the evaluation’s initial hypotheses grounded in peacebuilding literature and organised around two key concepts:

- the weaving, establishment and value of relationships (drawing mainly on J. P. Lederach), and
- power and agency (drawing mainly on R. McGinty, R. McGee and S. Lukes).

In line with these interests, causal pathways were proposed in advance to test across the two approaches, and an evaluation process was designed that could review and adjust the hypotheses of change while evaluating, making visible and understanding results. These pathways drew on relevant sociological and

peace literature and on prior experience implementing SAR processes in Myanmar (Gray & Burns, 2021).

Initial Causal Hypothesis

- Under favourable conditions for participation, dialogue, and accompaniment, these processes will support the institutionalisation of Municipal Peace Councils and contribute to the achievement of outcomes associated with everyday peace and the implementation of the Peace Agreement. Invisible power and hidden power will undermine the favourable conditions for participation required for the institutionalisation of Municipal Peace Councils and will hinder progress towards implementation of the Agreement and everyday peace.
- In the absence of everyday peace and progress in implementing the Peace Agreement, citizens will demand spaces through which to pursue the desired socio-political changes.
- Systemic Action Research (SAR) will help to expand power among project participants, thereby supporting the favourable conditions for participation required for the institutionalisation of Peace Councils and contributing to everyday peace and the implementation of the Peace Agreement.
- SAR will also support the systemic integration of peacebuilding actors, leading to the favourable conditions for participation necessary for the institutionalisation of Peace Councils and, in turn, contributing to the implementation of the Peace Agreement and to everyday peace.

In parallel, the government organizations and the other funder were interested in systematizing the experiences to learn about the capacity building of the Peace Councils and the role that dialogue could play in such strengthening. These interests led to the incorporation of a systematization of experiences design into the

proposal, aimed at identifying lessons learned and recommendations for working with the three Peace Councils. This design featured the local facilitators—of the dialogue, planning, and SAR processes—as the protagonists of the meta-reflection and analysis that would give meaning to the lived experiences during implementation. Furthermore, this analysis would be enriched by the actions of the evaluation process that had a oriented toward questions of a more theoretical or methodological nature.

The systematisation drew on monitoring information and deliberately created spaces for reflection in order to generate lessons learned from the process, organised around challenges, solutions, and recommendations for work with the Peace Councils.

Initial Theory of Change, which guided the learning focus of the systematization

- If dialogue, planning, and relational capacities are strengthened within the Peace Councils, then their agendas will be strengthened and/or enhanced.

In other words, Adapt Peacebuilding's initial pilot design included an evaluation-systematisation component that responded to the external parties' learning interests, following—at least at the start—the more top-down way evaluations are usually designed. It had a practical spirit, but not one oriented by participation for transformation.

Roles and adaptations

At the start of the evaluation process, the evaluation team included:

- a **coordinator** (who also coordinated the pilot),
- an **external adviser** outside the territory (part of Adapt), and
- a **systematization leader** who, while independent of the implementation team, participated in the evaluation design and was responsible for monitoring tools and systematisation; facilitated reflective conversation spaces; and supported surveys and semi-structured interviews that formed the baseline.

The person leading the systematisation guided the analysis of those actions considered most relevant to the learning interests related to work with the Peace Councils, and supported the drafting of the initial documents on findings and recommendations, developed in coherence with the systematisation process. As an individual who was *independent* of the implementation and facilitation of the initiative's spaces, this person involved both the local and national teams in spaces for information generation and reflective analysis of the systematisation. In addition, this role enabled a fresh perspective on the day-to-day experiences reported by the field-based team.

The local facilitation team also co-facilitated the evaluation spaces held with the co-researchers and supported the drafting process of the initial findings

and recommendations documents. This team was trained both in the SAR methodology and in the general principles of the evaluation that was carried out, as well as in the use of the evaluation tools.

The co-researchers played a central role in the participatory planning of Phase 1. Dedicated spaces were created for them—local participant leaders and Peace Council members—to decide what they wanted to be trained in and how, to make a wide range of operational decisions, and to define agendas, invitees, frequency of meetings, and related aspects.

They also played a central role in Phase 2 of the SAR process, during which they acted as community researchers. In this role, they collectively defined the research question, the boundaries and scope of the process, carried out the analysis (of the map), and led the design, implementation, and learning from the actions of the action learning circles, among other activities. All of these roles required participants to put their curiosity into practice, to engage in horizontal conversations, and to develop—through learning by doing—a range of skills, including those related to the generation of life stories, among others.

Because the co-researchers already had such an active role in the initiative itself, it was challenging to add another layer of work by asking them to lead the evaluation design. In other words, inviting them to take on an active role from the evaluation design phase would have saturated their time, which was already fully devoted to the activities of the initiative.

Moreover, this could also have been confusing, given that local participants had already generated and engaged with questions related to their own learning interests concerning the traditional capacity-building approach, the mapping process, and the action-research circles. As such, introducing an additional request related to the design of the evaluation and its guiding questions could have been overwhelming, or even perceived as redundant.

Given the SAR methodology and the context described the effort to evaluate this initiative posed an additional challenge beyond the usual peacebuilding challenges (such as moving beyond linear logic, including diverse perspectives, or measuring predefined outcomes in complex contexts). This evaluation had to put into practice a participatory, learning-focused evaluation of a process that was itself one of transformative knowledge production: a kind of meta-evaluation.

Finally, the co-researchers and other community members participated in evaluation spaces that were used iteratively to understand and adjust the causal hypotheses. Time was dedicated to presenting the evaluation and supporting shared understanding through critical and reflective conversations, where it was possible to question hypotheses, revisit even implicit assumptions behind the creation of the Peace Councils under the Peace Agreement and examine those underlying the pilot activity design proposals.

The co-researchers also participated in moments of analysis of the results that they themselves had proposed. However, only those who were part of the

SAR process also played an active role in drafting the initial findings and recommendations documents. This was mainly due to the timing of the initiative, which concluded earlier in the municipalities without SAR, as shown in the timeline. This condition did not, however, mean that the co-researchers from the three municipalities were not accompanied in the use of the learnings. In all three cases, specific spaces were created to define the usefulness of these learnings in relation to the forthcoming actions of the Peace Council and of the SAR process, according to each context.

Bricolage, implementation and adaptations

Navigating the tensions among different theories of change, and articulating them, was necessary to ensure meaningful inclusion of participants so that power could be redistributed and an evaluation system could function from the bottom up and across horizontal levels.

The evaluation design therefore incorporated baseline information gathered through a form and semi-structured interviews at the start of the project. This helped understand perceptions of the three Peace Councils among external municipal actors, municipal councillors (both those who would and would not participate), and national government staff whose work related to the Peace Councils. The tools were initially informed by the causal hypotheses described above.

During implementation, facilitators kept logs and records of activities, and held reflective spaces guided by systematisation tools.

Finally, to address questions linked to the causal hypotheses, the team proposed an outcome harvesting process in a ‘light’ version. To make the design suitable for the context, they developed a bricolage—iteratively adapting methods and tools such as semi-structured interviews, surveys, joint and individual reflection formats, observation formats, exercises to identify outcomes, assign significance and contribution, and backwards causal tracing— all within the logics of systematisation and outcome harvesting. This helped reconcile differences among distinct learning interests.

This bricolage also made it easier for the evaluation process to remain open to adaptations and to respond to different (though aligned) interests. In this way, it sought to address the question: how and to what extent using SAR with local councillors contributed to creating collective and relational agency with the potential to transform power relations in the territory; and at the same time to gather lessons learned during implementation for strengthening the Peace Councils.

During implementation, dedicated spaces were maintained in which the evaluation team reviewed the causal hypotheses and adjusted them over time. This anticipation—or willingness to remain engaged in an emergent design process— was partly enabled by the assumptions underpinning the project’s initial design: a stance that recognised the complexity inherent in peacebuilding, as well as the corresponding need for a systemic approach.

The characteristics of the initiative itself invited a reflexive evaluation design, one that assumed it would not be possible to define outcomes in advance, given that it would be the participants themselves who would co-create their direction, conceptual framework, and coherently guide the purpose of the actions.

The following section explains in concrete terms how this methodological adaptation unfolded.

The iterative adaptation of the initial hypotheses began early on, at the start of the pilot phase, when only the capacity-strengthening methodology focused on dialogue was being implemented. This was based on the assumption that participants from local governments would take part in the activities in their capacity as Peace Council members.

However, following the initial sessions and participatory planning, public officials and institutional representatives no longer participated as peers. Instead, they assumed particular roles. In some cases, they withdrew altogether; in others, they attended without engaging as active and horizontal participants; and in others, they sought to control the agenda of the spaces.

During one of the systematisation’s reflective sessions, alongside the analysis of the baseline and the monitoring of participation, it became evident that the hypothesis stating that *SAR will support the systemic integration of peacebuilding actors, leading to favourable conditions for participation necessary for the institutionalisation of Peace Councils, and thereby contributing to the implementation of the Peace Agreement and to everyday peace* could not be tested.

This was because integration was not occurring even at the most incipient level, within the spaces that had originally been envisaged.

With this situation identified, the team proceeded to review the assumption that the SAR methodology in El Tambo would contribute to the relational reconfiguration of power dynamics. As a result, four research questions were formulated, which better integrated and focused the learning interest and made explicit the role of power dynamics in the process:

1. How do vertical relationships emerge in the work of peace initiatives?
2. How do power dynamics manifest in relationships between institutions, citizens, communities, elites, and other actors?

3. Which forms of power need to be transformed, and how do they change? (invisible power, hidden power, visible power, knowledge, violence/intimidation, governmental power, power over, and power with)
4. What are the characteristics of peacebuilding spaces that are genuinely transformative?

Subsequently, these questions began to be addressed through the exploration of causal pathways that, by the end of the pilot phase, replaced the initial causal hypotheses. This led to a rethinking of the role of institutionalisation and integration as they had been originally conceived, towards an approach that ultimately took the following form:

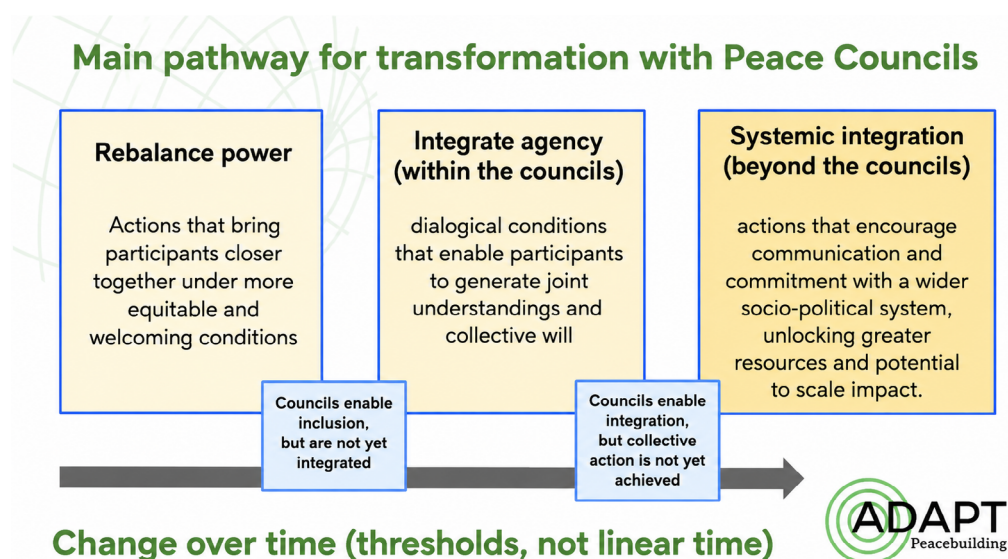


Figure 4. Image from internal Project presentation (Gray & Báez-Silva, 2022)

At this stage of reflection, the design of the evaluation process was further refined. Initially, only an adapted version of the outcome harvesting methodology had been proposed—lighter than the full, manual-based version—. However, when the discussion on inclusion and horizontal participation of the co-researchers was brought into the process, we turned to a methodological bricolage that would allow us to share the initial hypotheses with them.

These hypotheses did not translate into specific, predefined results; rather, they had provided a general orientation for the actions and for the work of the evaluation team.

For this reason, at the final stage of the pilot we designed a learning space that was as horizontal as possible. While we presented the main causal hypotheses of the initiative being evaluated, we did so by opening up a space for horizontal dialogue. Within this space, we discussed the assumptions underlying the process and even revisited the theories through which, by law, an institutional body such as the Peace Councils is created within the framework of the Peace Agreement (2016). In this way, together with the co-researchers, we opened a dialogue space around peacebuilding—globally, in their territory, in their life histories, and in their everyday lives (including their roles as Peace Council members)—.

Making the underlying assumptions explicit—and engaging in dialogue about them—enabled participants to situate themselves in relation to peacebuilding theories and to reflect critically on them. Following

this exploration of the main hypotheses, we facilitated a space to propose and understand the outcomes identified by the co-researchers themselves. These outcomes were documented in writing, reviewed and prioritised collectively, and finally assessed in terms of their significance for territorial peacebuilding.

Based on what had been agreed, a causal tracing exercise was facilitated to work backwards and explain which actions, conditions, and/or situations had made each outcome possible. Finally, the co-researchers scored the degree to which the project had contributed to the occurrence of each of the identified outcomes, followed by a further dialogue space to explore these scores collaboratively. In this space, those of us facilitating did not hold a monopoly over the questions; rather, meaning was co-constructed among peers, as participants compared perspectives, reflected together, and engaged in shared inquiry.

The co-researchers therefore reflected on the very theories on which, for example, the creation of the Peace Councils had been founded (a hypothesis that predates the project itself but is directly related to the hypothesis on institutionalisation), as well as on other power dynamics. This reflection generated moments in which their understanding of the local context was expanded, along with its national and global connections.

In these reflective conversations, they put forward their own interpretations of their position—as leaders, as citizens, and as Peace Council members—within the broader ecosystem. They were critical of the

hypotheses and became aware of their own power and role in generating change.

For example, they recognised what they themselves had done to enable a different kind of relationship between the Peace Council and the mayor's office. This was reflected in concrete changes: the mayor now attended meetings from beginning to end; remained present without checking his phone or leaving the room; asked questions; assigned specific tasks to members of his team in response to proposals made by the Peace Council; and, in one meeting, explicitly stated that he “now understood what the Peace Council wanted to do, could see a clear path forward, and could imagine concrete actions to support them”.

The opportunity to learn about the why and the purpose behind the evaluation component facilitated a deeper understanding of the initiative itself —particularly of the SAR approach— and helped create a space of trust. This, in turn, enabled the identification of significant changes of many different kinds, especially at the personal level, likely as a result of participants seeing their voices and perspectives valued within the broader initiative. Several co-researchers, who were also Peace Council members, explicitly mentioned this, and it was recorded as such.

At this stage, as the initiative has continued to consolidate a subsequent SAR process beyond the pilot's first cycle, the Theories of Change developed within the action learning circles—emerging from collective local knowledge and grounded in life histories—have evolved according to their own logic

and pace. In some cases, this evolution has led them to move away from the initial hypotheses embedded in the initiative's design, and even from some of the assumptions that underpin the use of a methodology such as SAR within the peacebuilding field.

This autonomy inherent to SAR approaches has added complexity to the challenge of the evaluation process. The evaluation is not only tasked with articulating the different learning dimensions of the initiative—which at times are disjointed (for example, the Theories of Change emerging from the action-learning circles compared to those of the overall project)—but it must also navigate the tensions between them as they move away from the initial shared frame of interest. More specifically, some circles, drawing on locally co-constructed knowledge, have chosen not to include actions oriented towards institutionalisation, and even the role of the Peace Council itself has evolved over the course of the process. Meanwhile, for the funder's initial interests and for the implementing foundation's external team (working outside the territory), this objective—as well as the role of the Peace Council— continues to be central to the purpose and justification of the initiative.

In the face of these tensions, the iterative adaptation of the evaluation process seeks to respond in a way that not only enables learning and adaptation (in practice) across the different dimensions of the initiative, but also allows these dimensions to enter into dialogue and mutually enrich one another. Otherwise, the gap in understandings of the initiative itself would persist between, on the one hand, the local implementing team and the co-researchers, and on the other,

the external implementation team and the funder (Humanity United).

Consequently, the adaptations aimed at fostering more horizontal involvement of co-researchers and local facilitators in the design of the evaluation, as well as the creation of reflective spaces around the explicit expectations and interests of the different parties, have been ways of responding to this challenge. These adaptations have also made it possible to introduce adjustments to the development of the initiative itself, particularly in terms of communications.

It is also worth noting that, throughout this process, the value and potential of the enabling environment became evident—that is, how the different actors involved (funders, Peace Council members, the implementation team, and the community) interact in relation to the team's relational and technical skill set—. On the one hand, the intention to adopt a participatory design for the evaluation process itself required considerable work of interpretation or translation across different domains: the technical language of evaluation, the theories and prior findings, the historical account of adjustments made, and the interests of the local team and participating community members. On the other hand, this challenge was compounded by the need to make reflections and learnings accessible across multiple perspectives, particularly in light of interests that, at least on the surface, appeared to diverge.

Use and its challenges

At the time of the initial design, it seemed that the bricolage approach and the participation of people in diverse roles in defining the evaluation focus would guarantee use and impact. However, the government institutions involved changed representatives during implementation, and as a result the final products, findings and recommendations were not considered relevant—following the path of many traditional evaluations: being filed away as proof of good delivery, without influencing future design.

The evaluation was not used by the national government institutions mainly because the two professionals who had originally managed the alliance and were genuinely interested in the process resigned during implementation. New staff were assigned to supervise, focusing on 'proper' closure: they received the products and, despite efforts to share learning and raise visibility, their management was limited to signing off deliverables.

This situation highlighted the importance of the enabling environment, particularly in relation to institutional dynamics, and at the same time underscored the value of genuine accompaniment at the moment of evaluation use with the different actors involved at various points in the process. This implies the need for strategies that enable meaningful engagement with these actors, aligned with their possibilities and interests.

At the same time, while the design of accompaniment strategies for use is essential throughout the lifecycle of the initiative, the challenge of their feasibility also emerges. In the specific case of Co-Inspira, the initiative relied on a small team carrying out multiple tasks in parallel. This likely influenced the fact that a more explicit and adaptive use component was not designed for governmental entities, and that —given the SAR methodology— the focus of accompaniment for use was placed primarily on those participating as co-researchers.

In light of the tensions described in the previous section, the need to establish points of common ground and convergence among the interests of the different parties involved emerges as a question not only for analysis and methodological bricolage, but also for the use component of the evaluation. If evaluation use succeeds in building bridges of mutual understanding across different perspectives, it can enable decision-making for future initiatives and local actions that is informed by more complex understandings of the peacebuilding system, as well as foster mutual recognition among actors who are often perceived as occupying positions so distant that they appear, at times, to be opposing.

Despite this limitation —which could well open up an entire reflection on evaluation use and the multiple variables that influence it within the public sphere— we would like to highlight that the evaluation did have an impact in other spaces. For example, as understandings generated through the evaluation evolved, they

were used to inform decision-making at different levels of both the initiative and its evaluation:

- the causal hypotheses were repeatedly reviewed, gradually simplified, and refined;
- the initial evaluation design —originally shaped by the curiosities of external actors— was revisited, giving way to a process that involved local teams and their learning interests, as well as the co-researchers, in the design; and
- reflective spaces were created with Humanity United (the donor) to explore, through an iterative and dialogic process, their learning interests.

Likewise, in another instance of evaluation use, the initial findings from the pilot evaluation led to specific adjustments by the Peace Council members to the actions they had planned as a Council. In the municipality of El Tambo, the findings also resulted in adjustments to the actions of the action learning circles. In addition, the analysis conversations helped to strengthen a shared perspective and the participants' perceived sense of agency.

The evaluation findings were also used to inform the design of the initiative's third phase, through sessions held with co-researchers, the local team, and the implementing organisation's team, in which space was intentionally created to reflect on the findings and the corresponding next steps.

For example, in relation to the institutionalisation hypotheses, difficult conversations emerged around whether the focus of the next SAR phase should be

on influencing the implementation of the El Tambo Peace Council's Action Plan, and whether this space was—or was not—the appropriate one through which to activate the Theories of Change developed by the action-research circles, given the power and non-power dynamics surrounding the Council, as well as other structural conditions shaping its function.

One such condition was that 80% of the Peace Council members who participated in the process reached the maximum period permitted for representing their communities before the start of the second phase, making their exit from this space imminent.

The findings were also shared with Humanity United (the funder, with a learning focus on peacebuilding methodologies within the framework of the Peace Agreement) and with selected interested individuals from local governments. In addition to sharing the written reports, progress meetings were held, along with a final virtual meeting designed to facilitate uptake through a more dialogical and non-hierarchical accountability approach.

Thus, while the meetings and presentations with national-level actors did not yield visible effects from the perspective of the implementation team, in the case of Humanity United the exchanges helped keep open a space for reflection. These conversations connected the understandings generated through Co-Inspira with SAR processes in other parts of the world and continue to keep the door open to reflection and learning—sustaining the curiosity and shared interest that motivated the parties from the outset.

In contrast to the lack of impact that the final, technical, rigorous, and well-written findings had on national government institutions, the simple act of democratising the evaluation—drawing on a process of methodological bricolage—ensured the use and relevance of the evaluation component in other spaces. For example, for decision making and adaptation of the initiative itself, the action-research circles plans, the Peace Council activities, and in the mental models of co-researchers who used and shared their new collective understandings in other participative spaces. In doing so, it transformed the evaluation itself into a valuable (and transformative) space, with influence and change-making potential comparable to that of any other initiative activity. This was possible because, in coherence with its methodological principles, the evaluation process upheld the spirit of participation, dialogue, and the collective construction of knowledge.

Lessons learned

In closing, we share our main reflections on the process, highlighting lessons learned about the challenges and strengths that emerged in the Co-Inspira evaluation. We structure the reflection using the domains of the Inclusive Rigour Framework: participation and inclusion; Use and bricolage; within an enabling environment.

First and foremost, we would like to highlight the distinctive nature of this initiative that —by using SAR as its methodological approach— meant it constituted an uncommon evaluation context, given that the process being evaluated inherently required a level of transformative participation on the part of those involved. In this sense, the experience we share illustrates how an effort was made to embed a participatory evaluation process within an already participatory initiative, where certain conditions for genuine participation were already in place. Even so, it reveals the challenges that arise when navigating differing levels of participation among diverse actors throughout the process.

Participation and inclusion

Although the evaluation began as theory-oriented, the way it unfolded illustrates the importance of seriously opening evaluation spaces to participation by actors who are not usually involved. This is not guided by inclusion for its own sake (regardless of how and why), but by intentionality: why, how and when do we broaden participation.

We observe this because, within the evaluation, a decision could well have been taken to involve all co-researchers at every stage of the process, including from the design phase onward. Such a choice would, in all likelihood, have generated competition for the co-researchers' time —a resource already heavily committed, given that they were simultaneously

engaged in a learning process designed and carried out by themselves—. Conversely, another possible decision would have been not to broaden their participation in the evaluation, but instead to limit it to an informant role, keeping the spaces for hypothesis analysis and discussion exclusively within the technical evaluation team.

Instead, the Co-Inspira evaluation addressed the question: to what extent do different people participate (at what level) and for what purpose? This made it possible to review roles and involve co-researchers in key moments such as reviewing theories. That, in turn, led to theory adaptation and learning both from the implementation perspective and from local participants, expanding understandings of how the peace system works beyond a purely territorial lens.

In other words, although the co-researchers were not involved in the design phase—and the evaluation initially drew on a theoretically grounded approach—it was through their participation in the analysis, reflecting on what was being investigated, that it became possible to adapt the hypothesis to local realities. These theoretical adaptations contributed to the overall quality of the evaluation, strengthening its rigour, and in doing so provided a clear example of how to move beyond viewing participation and rigour as being in tension or in a dichotomous relationship. Instead, this process allowed both criteria to work together towards a shared horizon.

This lesson learned reinforces the invitation put forward by the Inclusive Rigour framework to recognise

that participation in evaluation is not at odds with quality, but is instead essential to strengthening it. Participation enables emergent learning to surface—such as adjustments to theories—and also makes it possible for relevant and unforeseen forms of use to emerge. One such example was the learning process experienced by the co-researchers regarding the logics through which peacebuilding policies are designed.

Another concrete example of this lesson learned was reflected in how the intentional question of how, why, and at what points participation should be expanded was taken up during the design of the evaluation for the continuation of the SAR initiative beyond the pilot phase, which is still under implementation. This reconsideration of the question was carried out through a participatory process, in response to a gap that had emerged between the donor's expectations for the initiative and those of the co-researchers.

As a result, dialogic spaces were held around the evaluation design, which involved bringing in people from new perspectives into the process of shaping the evaluation questions. This, in turn, also led to the formation of an explicitly more diverse evaluation team.

That said, this expansion of participation in what constituted the second part of the evaluation presented here does not mean that we consider greater participation to always be inherently preferable. Rather, we see participation as something that is always desirable when guided by a dialogical and diverse process that intentionally explores its hows, whys, and whens.

When we ask questions about the quality of participation, what we wish to emphasise is that such quality is shaped by the reflective, collective, and intentional consideration of different forms of participation. This may be because those choices aim to open up spaces of inclusion as broadly as possible, because they respond to existing constraints, or because—given the characteristics of a particular initiative—certain roles or modes of participation are more appropriate or relevant than others.

In summary, the lesson is about designing different forms of participation in a way that links moments and perspectives—not because we simply 'like' participation, but because this enables transformation of theories and initiatives and helps strengthen change by understanding it—.

Bricolage

Methodologies are the tools we use to answer practical questions about how participation happens. In design, we combine methods so voices can be heard for useful ends. The Co-Inspira evaluation shows that it is possible to develop a bricolage of methods not out of convenience, but because an intentional design process leads us to the question of use as the guide for design decisions.

An example of this articulation between the question of intentional participation, the response given when addressing methodological choices, and the way a

focus on use in turn guides the selection and adaptation of methods can be seen in how outcome harvesting was adapted in the Co-Inspira evaluation. Specifically, during the collective spaces for identifying changes, an additional and relevant space was introduced in which the underlying theories were explicitly addressed with the co-researchers (from the three municipalities). This created a horizontal reflection on those theories, resulting in a participatory analysis that made their adjustment possible.

In the pilot evaluation, we can observe that what guided the design questions was a commitment to participatory, use-oriented learning, with a focus on the people who are the protagonists of change. The approach was not limited to following the initial evaluation questions alone (which already reflect a form of use), nor to pursuing participation for its own sake. Rather, it involved remaining in a continual process of listening to emerging voices as they arose, precisely to ensure that the evaluation would be useful to them.

Intentionally maintaining the articulation between use, methods, and who is involved —through iterative methodological bricolage— proved to be key to achieving a rigorous participatory evaluation. In the case of SAR, it could not be taken for granted that evaluation questions and uses were the same, nor that they would remain aligned as the SAR process unfolded. This iterative design process also enabled participation to actively shape the evaluation itself, as well as the development of the initiative as a whole.

Making this iterative learning-driven adaptation loop effective ultimately generated a gap —or divergence— between the understandings held by different groups of people involved in the process. This, in turn, required navigating a series of tensions among diverse perspectives and positioned the evaluation in an interpreter/mediator role. We explore this unexpected effect in greater detail as the third lesson learned, in the following section.

Use and enabling environment

This evaluation experience shows that, in terms of use by the national actors involved from the start of the pilot, there was no success. Those actors were involved in different ways, but the two representatives resigned before the pilot ended, leading to discontinuity in their understanding. Together with a change in national government, this resulted in both entities' indifference towards the pilot and its results.

It therefore seems unproductive to ask whether, from a technical participatory-evaluation standpoint, it would have been possible to deploy other forms of engagement with those actors in order to enhance evaluation use, given the evident structural features of governmental institutional dynamics. What does prove useful, however, is to refocus the question of learning about use on Humanity United —an actor that remains actively involved in the initiative— and to examine how the evaluation was used from their perspective.

Through the Co-Inspira evaluation, learnings emerged that were evident to those involved in the local and national teams, but not to the donor. These learnings led to adaptations in the initiative that were not clearly reflected in the design documents and ultimately resulted in a gap in how the process was understood by the implementing team on the one hand, and by the donor on the other. This gap only became apparent at the moment of the initiative's third-year renewal, and it was only resolved through dialogue in which a member of the evaluation team was re-integrated into the process.

When we therefore turn our attention to evaluation use, the environmental dimension comes to the fore—specifically the communication and facilitation skills required to navigate the adaptations that occur when evaluation learning is put into use within an initiative—. In other words, using evaluation learning in real time to adapt an initiative requires the deployment of ongoing communication mechanisms with those who are not part of the day-to-day process, so that different actors can remain in dialogue and reach points of convergence regarding what is taking place.

Otherwise, the very strength of a participatory, use-oriented evaluation–learning process may end up opening a gap in how different actors understand what is happening. This can generate tensions, potentially damage relationships, and even lead to harm if such divergences result in processes being abruptly closed or in one of the parties feeling excluded or unrecognised.

Participatory evaluation in complex contexts where initiatives are adaptive requires incorporating governance mechanisms that enable iterative and open communication, at the same pace at which learning is generated and put to use. Otherwise, even within a participatory initiative, there is a risk of ending up with one group that is learning in real time and continuously reframing its understanding of the process, while other individuals or groups remain anchored in different perspectives, simply because the process is evolving without being visible to them.

When this risk materialises—as was the case with Co-Inspira—it prevents the learning cycle from being fully closed: the cycle that begins by bringing theory into practice, continues through adapting practice, but fails to return those adaptations back into theory in order to sustain the conversation from that renewed point of understanding.

We are therefore left with questions regarding the role of members of the evaluation team within these processes of communication and governance that involve navigating tensions, as this role requires a particular position of power—not only to facilitate dialogue, but also to enable the reaching of shared agreements despite existing tensions. In this context, the political dimension of evaluation becomes tangible, along with its responsibility within processes of transformation. This also brings to the fore the need for a deeper reflection on the power positions and relational capacities of evaluation teams, if they are to achieve influence, enable mediation, and ultimately support the participatory use of learning.

What kinds of alliances and/or structures are needed for evaluation to hold the degree of power required to be meaningfully included in governance? To what extent does having evaluation team members who are not 100% involved in implementation facilitate these conversations and help navigate them? And how closely should the evaluation team be involved in the initiative in order to be both able—and willing—to take on a role that goes beyond design, implementation, and analysis?

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