

Chapter 12

Strengthening Evaluation Capacities

EvalParticipativa's Strategy, Achievements and Challenges

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Abstract

This chapter examines the experience of the EvalParticipativa initiative in building capacities for evaluation with social participation. After describing its intervention 'model', based on a hybrid format that combines a community of 'practice' and 'learning', the discussion focuses on the dialogical and participatory adult-education methodology adopted. To this end, it characterises the participating population, the objectives and content, the design of teaching tools, and the format and types of training sessions. By way of lessons learned, the chapter highlights the importance of professional training as a mechanism for adopting participatory approaches that ensure the methodological rigour required for evaluation in different Latin American contexts.

Keywords

Capacity development, Participatory evaluation, Methodological rigour, Latin America.

Citation

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Introduction

Since its creation, the Community of Practice and Learning in Participatory Evaluation for Latin America and the Caribbean (EvalParticipativa) has sought to strengthen the inclusive involvement of civil society in evaluation processes. To this end, it has defined three main strategic objectives:

- to strengthen and consolidate the community of practice and learning around participatory evaluation in the region;
- to facilitate the dissemination and institutionalisation of this evaluation approach through the development of written and audiovisual materials on participatory evaluation experiences and lessons learned;
- to promote training processes on participatory evaluation through courses for facilitators, seminars and in-person and virtual forums with representatives of civil society organisations in the region, the public and private sectors and academia, as well as the creation of opportunities for academic certification of training in this field.

The initiative emerged as the corollary of a series of participatory evaluations carried out in Costa Rica, Chile and Ecuador, in which those of us who make up the team of the Research Programme on Employment, Environment and Society (PETAS, www.petas-unsj.org) at the National University of San Juan (UNSJ) had taken part as external consultants.

These participatory evaluation projects had as their starting point and common denominator the need to strengthen evaluation capacities and to develop social participation mechanisms adapted to the local context and aimed at ensuring the greatest possible involvement of the multiple stakeholders connected, in each case, with the programmes and projects under evaluation. All of these experiences followed a similar process, which included:

- forming an evaluation team;
- running a training workshop on this approach (which was new to most participants);
- collectively reconstructing the theory of change of the intervention;
- designing an evaluation matrix;
- facilitating the entire evaluation process, from formulating the questions and objectives through to producing findings and recommendations and providing support for the communication and use of the results.

Upon reviewing those experiences, we realised that prior training and the support provided to members of the evaluation team had been decisive for their success, particularly with regard to the participants' active involvement.

Together with the team of the Focelac+ project (Strengthening a Culture of Evaluation and Learning in Latin America with a Global Outlook), run by the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval), we became aware of the gap that existed in the region regarding

capacity development for this type of evaluation. It was on this basis that, jointly with DEval, we designed EvalParticipativa in 2019. Its strategy aimed, on the one hand, to create a space for recovering and sharing the practices that, in isolation and largely unknown, had been developing in Latin America; and, on the other, to develop a strategy capable of capitalising on lessons learned and building new knowledge on the subject, from and for our own countries.

In this chapter we share our experience and learning around strengthening capacities for participatory evaluation. Following this introduction, we characterise EvalParticipativa's intervention model, based on a hybrid format of community of practice and learning. Here we highlight the community's objectives and the set of tools created to support these processes. In the following section we outline the most relevant features of the capacity building approach adopted, centred on a dialogical and participatory adult education methodology. To this end, we characterise the participating population, the aims and content, and the format of the training strategy, noting both the actions carried out and the pending tasks. By way of lessons learned, the final section opens up a reflection on the importance of professional training as a mechanism for adopting participatory approaches to evaluation in different Latin American contexts. We believe that the openness to participation that different institutions are able to offer for conducting inclusive evaluations depends both on political decisions and on the development of capacities that ensure the methodological rigour required of such evaluation experiences.

EvalParticipativa: a community of practice and learning

This initiative arose as a response to the question of how to achieve greater participation and a more central role for the diverse social actors in the evaluation of the programmes or projects that affect or involve them. As we have noted, we felt that there was a theoretical and instrumental deficit in many of the participatory evaluation experiences carried out in the region. Moreover, we did not know what the conditions were, nor the mechanisms that facilitate or obstruct effective citizen participation in evaluation processes. It was necessary to shed light on these issues in order to overcome the weaknesses of a good number of the participatory evaluations we had been involved in.

Among other questions, we asked ourselves whether there were evaluation experiences, developed in Latin America and the Caribbean, that would allow us to understand the aspects that make the difference in an evaluation in terms of real and effective social participation. At the same time, we wanted to explore the possible contributions of participatory and collaborative approaches to conventional evaluations. It was on the basis of these questions that we saw it as relevant and fitting to create a collective space for dialogue and the exchange of knowledge on the subject, which would allow us, on the one hand, to reflect and learn from the different experiences developed in the region and, on the other, to extend the reach of this type of evaluation by sharing methods and tools.

Convinced of the importance of horizontal and collective learning, we considered developing a community of practice and learning on participatory evaluation: that is, a meeting space in which to share the theoretical knowledge developed in different contexts while capitalising on Latin America's local practice and knowledge through the exchange and collective reflection on various approaches and methodologies. Thus, in contrast to a conventional training programme, EvalParticipativa was established as a meeting point between peers with a shared interest in deepening their knowledge of the subject and sharing experiences through different forms of interaction: training sessions, gatherings and tool fairs, webinars, publications, and the design of guides and teaching instruments, among others. By 'peers' we mean all those who, in one way or another, become involved in an evaluation process: evaluators, decision-makers who commission an evaluation, those who implement interventions, international cooperation agencies, and civil society organisations that are users of programmes and projects, among others. Our aim was that, through a space for face-to-face and/or virtual interaction, those interested in the field of participatory evaluation would reflect in order to improve their practice, support one another in their efforts, and jointly build products (methodologies and tools) that help to professionalise the practice of participatory evaluation.

In this way, the community-of-practice-and-learning format enabled us to bring together a social group with an interest in the subject, within which it was possible

to develop specialised knowledge by sharing spaces for reflection on each specific experience and professional practice. We aimed for this space to serve as a platform for the social and collective construction of knowledge about participatory evaluation, without the need for the figure of an 'expert'. We also incorporated capacity development sessions which feature dialogue-based and horizontal learning processes in which we addressed conceptual issues and methodologies on the subject.

On the basis of these premises, EvalParticipativa was designed as an initiative capable of:

- building and sharing theoretical and practical knowledge drawn from experiences developed in different countries, by highlighting the broad range of existing tools as well as the opportunity to develop new ones;
- supporting and accompanying projects, programmes or interventions whose methodological axis is a participatory approach in any of its variants and at any level;
- developing skills for participatory evaluation in both the public sector and civil society organisations;
- providing training on these topics, exchanging experiences and documenting good practices that enable lessons to be shared and new initiatives to be encouraged;
- strengthening alliances between and within regions, institutions and diverse organisations, including academia and evaluation training programmes;
- fostering the creation of the conditions needed

for participatory evaluation processes to become a regular practice in the region; that is, raising the awareness of main social actors, encouraging participants, and demonstrating the benefits of and the need to institutionalise this type of evaluation in order to strengthen the democratic relations of our societies.

The main meeting space was the website www.evalparticipativa.net, which is also receives feedback from via the social networks LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram. The creation of the website had the dual purpose of establishing the community of practice on the basis of broad communication and connection among the different stakeholders linked to the subject; and of developing capacity building activities (virtual forums and workshops) by offering specialised bibliography, teaching material and tools, as well as creating a repository of significant experiences and learning on the subject.

Simply to give a sense of the community's growth, it is worth noting that, as of September 2024, EvalParticipativa has more than four thousand people subscribed to the website, and more than 800 have taken part directly in some capacity development activity run by our team. In the few years since it emerged, EvalParticipativa has brought together all those with experience and interest in participatory evaluation in the region. Through a horizontal and generous exchange among its members, significant progress has been made towards the proposed objectives. Its open-door community format, established as a meeting

place, has fostered its members' desire to share among peers in order to learn more and improve our practice.

The platform has four main sections:

- 1. EvalParticipativa News.** This is the most dynamic and visible section of the website. In it we publish, every three weeks, signed pieces —a kind of thinking aloud on topics related to participatory evaluation—. In the form of brief accounts or articles, we have published reflections and experiences by the community's different members, addressing conceptual, methodological and technical issues and linking the field of evaluation and participation with crosscutting themes such as human rights, democracy, the gender perspective, climate change and other current topics. This section has also served to publicise postgraduate training opportunities, gatherings and conferences, as well as the publication of specific articles and other materials on the subject.
- 2. Digital library.** It contains publications of use to those wishing to carry out evaluations with social participation, and is the most complete bank of publications on the subject in the region. A broad range of publications on the community's topics of interest — from scientific journals and outreach books to manuals and tool guides — are available in this section. Its first subsection offers more than 50 manuals for participatory evaluation, which gather conceptual and methodological considerations on this evaluation approach and related topics. These are publications that deal mainly with the 'what'

and the ‘how’ of participatory and collaborative approaches in evaluation. Another subsection is devoted to sharing specific guides containing tools or instruments to facilitate participatory processes. Some were designed exclusively for participatory evaluations; others were designed for other types of activities (diagnosis, planning, popular education, key stakeholder mapping and socio-organisational support), but can be recreated or adapted for evaluation processes. Finally, the third subsection of the library houses a series of dossiers entitled *Thinking Together About Participatory Evaluation*. Here we gather the diversity of cases and reflective articles that have been published on our web platform, which attest to the richness and plurality of evaluation practices with social participation in the region, with occasional contributions from colleagues from other contexts. It is from these original materials that we created the dossiers, seeking to share what has been learned through an easily accessible publication that brings those contributions together, organising them into four main parts: public policy and civil society; conceptual perspectives; meaningful learning; and operational approaches and tools. The dossiers seek to express our commitment to adding voices and experiences around participatory evaluation in the region, serving as a resource for reference and discussion for public institutions, foundations, NGOs and young evaluators, as well as study and reflection material for postgraduate training with a participatory spirit.

3. Resources. This is perhaps the most complete and most visited section of the website. With six subsections, it seeks to share teaching instruments, audiovisual material and tools produced by the members of the EvalParticipativa community. One of these tabs offers a training set in whiteboard-animation format, which is designed to accompany and illustrate the *Sowing and Harvesting handbook*. It includes five short videos, one for each of the manual’s core chapters. Narrated as an illustrated story, the central content of each chapter unfolds and develops on a whiteboard, constituting a tool for self-learning and virtual training in participatory evaluation. Another of the website’s most consulted resources is the subsection devoted to the *Sowing and Harvesting documentary series*, which accompanies the participatory evaluation handbook of the same name. Its five episodes, based on experiences from Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Colombia and Chile, aim to illustrate the lessons learned from monitoring and participatory evaluation practices developed by different organisations in Latin America. To this end, we have selected emblematic, outstanding cases from the region, which present different nuances, levels, processes and tools of participation. In the documentary series it is the experiences —through the voices of their protagonists— that speak about participatory evaluation, generating interest in going deeper and learning more about this type of evaluation. More than a hundred people have taken part directly or indirectly in this documentary, sharing their experience on camera or else providing

information, supplying contacts or helping to organise the field trips. During our visits to each country, we interviewed both direct beneficiaries of the various interventions and the technical teams in charge of the programmes and projects. Together with officials, policymakers and the people who facilitated these evaluations, they reflected on the processes and learning generated by their evaluation experiences from different contexts and realities, describing their achievements and difficulties. This documentary series has proved to be a very useful teaching resource in all the capacity development activities, both face-to-face and virtual, that we have promoted through the community.

The voices of those who lead participatory evaluation in the region also have their place in EvalParticipativa. Through a series of short testimonial videos, this subsection shares testimonies from the members of our community of practice and learning. It is a free space for them to express their ideas, suggestions, examples and lessons learned from evaluation with social participation, which have been used in different training sessions—especially those delivered remotely—as conceptual and methodological support for developing the topics of each workshop, seminar or course. Two other subsections express the value of collective and community-based construction: participatory evaluation experiences and meaningful learning. The gathers experiences documented by EvalParticipativa, presented as examples of emblematic cases of this type of evaluation. It

details the implementation, the methodologies used, the lessons learned and the successes, as well as the difficulties and future challenges. The second includes first-person accounts by colleagues who have facilitated participatory evaluations in the region, sharing lessons that emerged from that practice. This subsection emphasises voices from the field, knowledge derived from practice, those many journeys, the stumbles and also the joys of having made it possible, the mistakes, limitations and unresolved difficulties. Here, through brief accounts, the community's meaningful learning is reflected as a way of capitalising on and sharing that learning so as to put it at the service of new and better experiences.

The final subsection among the website's resources is our toolbox. In this subsection we document participatory techniques created by members of the EvalParticipativa community, which have been used in different contexts, with different groups of social actors and for varied evaluation purposes. These are shared by means of a technical sheet, which provides a brief introduction to the context in which the tool was conceived and used, its purpose and intended audience, the method and/or instructions for using it, the format and necessary materials, and the learning and suggestions regarding its use and possible adaptations. Alongside the technical sheet, a short documentary is included in which the authors present and illustrate the use of the tool.

Participatory evaluation faces, among others, the challenge of creating real spaces for participation

in which multiple stakeholders can play a genuinely leading role in the evaluation agenda. This is why this subsection was created, offering — from systematised experience — tools suited to each social and cultural context in which evaluation is carried out. The tools documented can be used for different purposes: analysing reality, facilitating communication, building collective viewpoints, stimulating creativity or facilitating decision-making, reducing the predominance of some so as to give space to the voice of the shy. The EvalParticipativa toolbox is, without doubt, one of the most innovative tools in the community.

4. Virtual forum: this space aims to sustain and exemplify a culture of participation among its members by encouraging a broader conversation. The forums were developed mainly through an email list, in combination with webinars to open and/or close each of them. The topics the forums have addressed were the following:

- Participatory evaluation experiences in Latin America
- Participatory evaluation in times of COVID-19: Possible or wishful thinking?
- Participatory evaluation and rigour within the framework of transformative evaluation
- Postgraduate training in evaluation in Latin America
- Towards an inclusive perspective: gender and participation in evaluation.

Strengthening evaluation capacities: EvalParticipativa's strategy

EvalParticipativa's capacity development strategy has taken as its central focus the issue of participation and the leading role of the various social actors in the evaluation of the programmes or projects that affect and/or involve them. Topics such as reconstructing a programme's theory of change, or conceptual issues regarding evaluation such as design and sampling, and the development of specific tools for collecting and analysing data, among others, are addressed by giving a central place to the participatory component; that is, to aspects such as the identification and mapping of key stakeholders, the participatory development of evaluation questions, the collective construction of findings, and the sharing of results and recommendations. In other words, the strategy has been designed to be delivered in a participatory manner, in both its face-to-face and its virtual modes.

Participants

The capacity development activities have been aimed at a diverse group of participants, namely:

- participatory evaluation facilitators who had already developed some kind of experience in the region;

- leaders or representatives of social organisations (civil society) who form part of the target population of programmes and projects;
- researchers, lecturers and extension staff at universities and research centres linked to the field of monitoring and evaluation;
- independent evaluators or consultants interested in this evaluation approach;
- monitoring and evaluation leaders in programmes and projects driven by the public sector;
- officials and decision-makers from the public sector responsible for state programmes and projects;
- evaluation leaders in nongovernmental organisations, civil associations for social promotion and other entities of the so-called third sector; and
- young and emerging evaluators with an interest in this type of evaluation.

Of these groups of participants, the majority had experience in project management and some knowledge of evaluation, but were unfamiliar with the participatory evaluation approach, its scope and its purpose. The capacity development workshops offered a basic, introductory conceptual and methodological framework on this approach, adapting and recreating the content and the format according to the needs of each participating group, their previous experience in evaluation and their expectations. Figure 1 shows the percentage of participants in each group. Evaluation leaders from the public sector and NGOs — individuals with direct roles in programme and project evaluation — on the one hand, and young and emerging evaluators, with little experience but considerable motivation for the subject on the other, together account for 60% of EvalParticipativa's target population. With the exception of the group researchers and extension staff from universities in the region, who have shown great interest both in postgraduate training on these topics and in its application, accounting for 14% of participants, the other groups have been of similar importance in terms of the number of recipients of our training efforts.

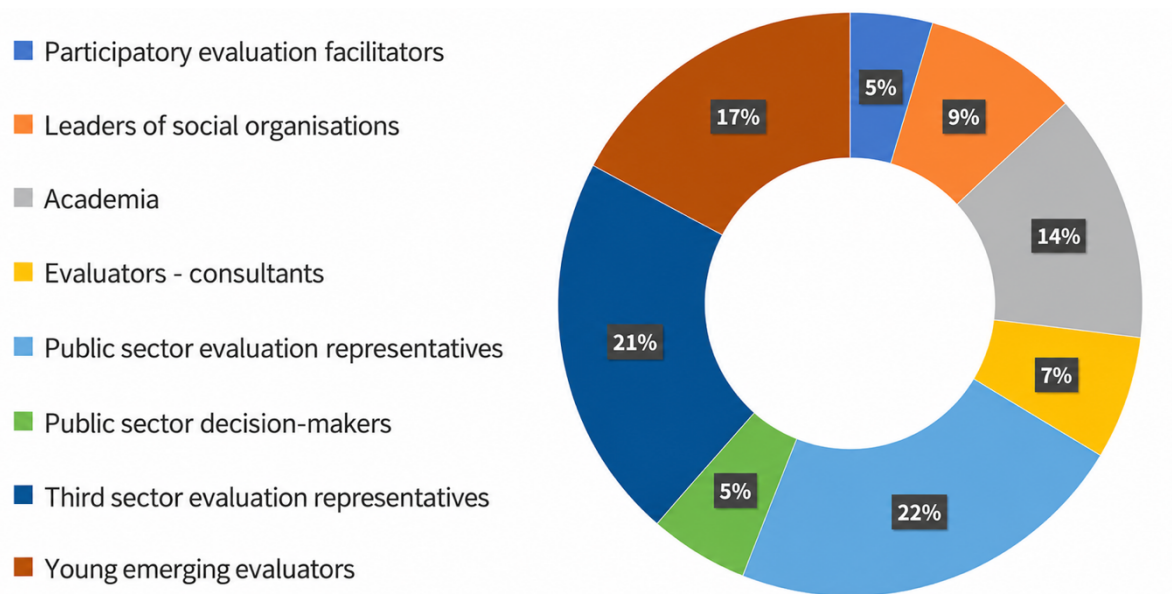


Figure 1. *Participants by profile, expressed as a percentage of the total (2019–2024)*

Objectives and core content

In general terms, the training offered by EvalParticipativa has sought to familiarise participants with a set of basic conceptual and methodological guidelines on participatory evaluation. Although there have been variations depending on the group and the institutional context, in general terms the aim was that, by the end of each training session, participants:

- had developed knowledge, skills and competence regarding the objectives, steps and stages involved in applying a participatory evaluation methodology;

- possessed the basic notions needed to apply the methodology and to facilitate a participatory evaluation process; and
- were in a position to share the knowledge acquired within their own interest group.

In terms of content, we have worked with a framework of four thematic modules, to be developed in different ways depending on the case (face-to-face or virtual), the duration (1 day or 4 days) and the characteristics of the group (grassroots organisations, evaluation technicians or professionals, officials responsible for programmes and projects). The first module is geared towards

introducing the topics of evaluation and participation, focusing on the ‘what’ of participatory evaluation—that is, conceptual aspects, background and nuances of a participatory evaluation, its principles and implications, as well as the analysis of concrete experiences—. The second module concentrates on the ‘how’ of participatory evaluation, developing methodological aspects and introducing the process and its steps, the design of the evaluation matrix and the construction of indicators in a participatory context. The third module develops the function of facilitation in a participatory evaluation, reflecting on the role of the external agent responsible for forming the evaluation team and supporting the process. The fourth module focuses on the tools and techniques for participatory evaluation. This module analyses the scope and limitations of the tools, clarifies the criteria for their selection, and constructs a classification according to the format and purpose of the techniques to be used.

Between 2019 and 2024, EvalParticipativa trained 818 people across 30 countries, in both face-to-face and virtual settings. Figure 2 presents the distribution of capacity development activities by country, according to the number of participants. The greatest concentration of participants is in Ecuador

and Colombia, priority countries for the bilateral cooperation of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the body that funds DEval’s Focelac+ project, the main partner of the EvalParticipativa initiative. Capacity development activities have also been conducted in other countries not prioritised by the BMZ, which were funded by local counterparts or other international organisations, representing 60% of the training delivered. Although Europe, Africa and Asia were not part of the target population identified initially, participants from these regions were also reached by EvalParticipativa’s training. Spain accounts for a significant group of participants, as a result of postgraduate training developed jointly with various universities and organisations in that country (the University of Seville, Loyola University, the University of Barcelona and the Andalusian Institute of Public Administration). Other participants from outside Latin America took part as beneficiaries in international training events to which EvalParticipativa was invited, such as the International Program for Development Evaluation Training (IPDET, Switzerland) and training offered within the framework of the National Evaluation Capacities international conference of the United Nations Development Programme.

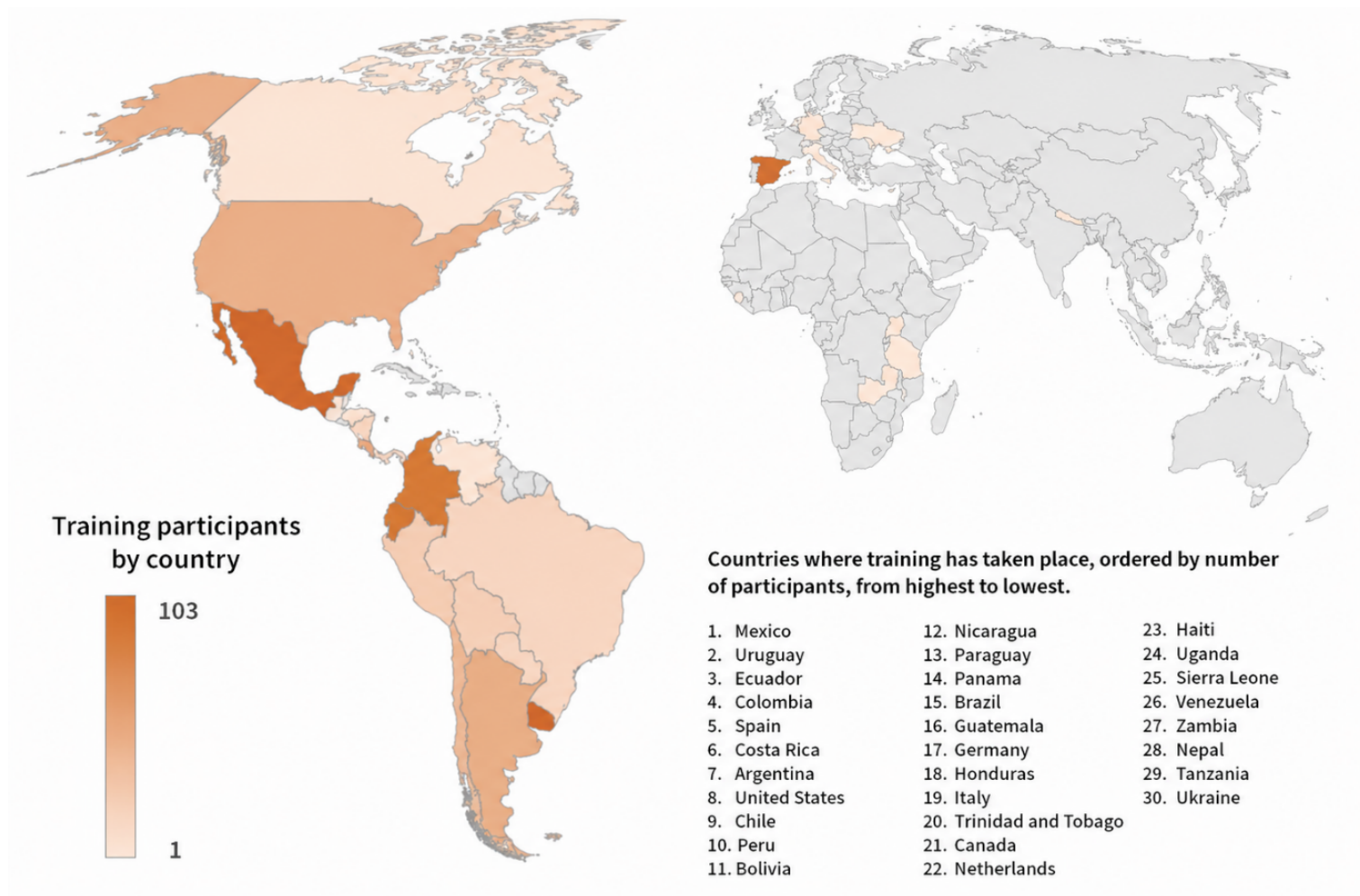


Figure 2. *Distribution of EvalParticipativa's capacity development activities by country, according to the number of participants*

Format of the training process

The capacity development strategy adopted an approach known as in-service capacity strengthening: training activities focused on developing skills, knowledge and use of tools among professionals linked to the field of evaluation. The strategy was aimed especially at leaders of social and community organisations who form part of the target population of programmes and projects, young professionals with a vocation for working on these topics, and officials or decision-makers, both from the public sector and from NGOs, foundations and other organisations of the so-called third sector.

The capacity strengthening strategy has mainly comprised workshops and training courses, face-to-face and virtual, which we focus on in the following paragraphs. It has also included virtual forums, materialised in the form of online conferences or seminars aimed at people who are already connected with the subject. These forums are offered as a mechanism for continuous training, knowledge updating, skills development and the introduction of new tools for participatory evaluation. In addition, introductory talks have been held, intended to provide young and emerging evaluators with the basic information, guidance and tools needed to understand and begin to take part in an evaluation project with social participation.

The training methodology adopted a workshop-based format, a dynamic and participatory approach centred

on active interaction and the cocreation of knowledge among participants. In each workshop, the aim was for participants to be the protagonists of their own learning, encouraging active participation, joint reflection and the exchange of experiences. Through group, experiential, graphic and written techniques, we have sought to create an environment in which participants learn from one another, drawing on the diversity of knowledge, their own practice and the contribution of the facilitators. The instruments designed by EvalParticipativa (available on the website) —such as the *Sowing and Harvesting handbook*, the whiteboard-animation training set, the documentary series with cases from five countries, the testimonial videos of leading figures on the subject, and the toolbox— have been used to support these capacity building processes.

In keeping with the seven principles of participatory evaluation (Tapella et al., 2021), the training workshops have been based on the notion of the collective construction of knowledge. This implies, on the one hand, starting by valuing and integrating into the training process the participants' wealth of previous experiences, recognising their accumulated knowledge and using it as the basis for new learning. On the other hand, it suggests recognising that knowledge is built through dialogue and critical reflection, with facilitators acting as enablers of the process — guides able to encourage participants to develop their own ideas and solutions. Likewise, the training sought to give prominence to the local context, adapting content and activities to the specific needs and characteristics of each group of participants. We tried to ensure that

what was learned in each training workshop was pertinent, relevant and applicable to the work and social environment, addressing the real problems or situations that participants face when adopting the approach and facilitating its practical application.

As Figure 1 shows, the diversity of participants in the training sessions has been remarkable, so we have tried to ensure that the workshops have a flexible structure that enables them to adapt to group dynamics and emerging interests, adjusting content and methods as the workshop evolves and adopting, as appropriate, different techniques and tools (group dynamics, roleplay, case studies, debates and teamwork, among others). Likewise, we have alternated between virtual and face-to-face training, with different durations and types of participation, as Figure 3 illustrates. The COVID-19 pandemic forced us into virtual delivery, a

mode we have maintained —mainly for cost reasons— to the present day. There is no doubt that face-to-face workshops, lasting 1 to 2 days or 3 to 5 days, are the ones that yield the best results in terms of the experience and adoption of new capacities. Virtual sessions, although they have the advantage of greater coverage in terms of the number of participants and regional distribution, are limited in their thematic reach to a basic or introductory level of training.

All the capacity development opportunities have included an interim or final evaluation, which has made it possible to adjust the design from one workshop to the next, improve the activities, rethink the content and recreate the tools used. Participants have also been able to self-assess their progress and reflect on their learning, thereby promoting autonomy and critical thinking.

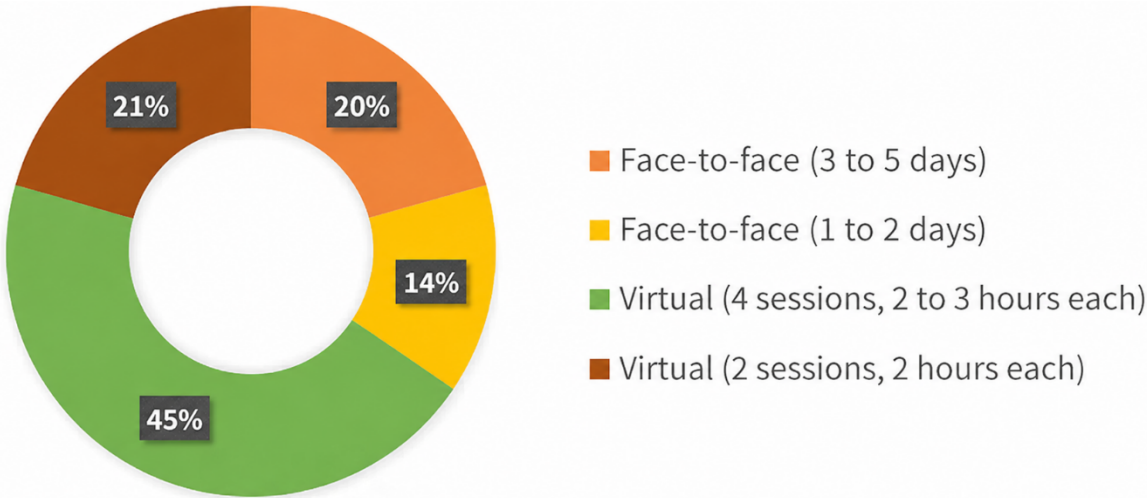


Figure 3. Training modalities, by contact hours and type of participation

Training of trainers in participatory evaluation: unfinished business

For six years the EvalParticipativa team has been delivering participatory evaluation training in the region. The growth of the community, the wide acceptance of our proposal and a social and political context that demands evaluations that are participatory and sensitive to the needs of civil society meant that we were unable to meet all the requests for training. Faced with this unmet demand, we decided to design the project for training trainers in participatory evaluation. This project has not yet been implemented, mainly because of a lack of resources among the institutional counterparts to which the potential group of participants in what would be the programme's first edition belong.

The training-of-trainers in evaluation course seeks to train instructors or facilitators in the methodologies and techniques needed to teach others how to carry out participatory evaluations. The idea is that this group, having completed specific training and certification, should be able to replicate these training sessions in their own countries, thereby expanding the reach of the capacity development strategy.

The intention is that those who already have knowledge of evaluation methodologies with social participation, and knowledge of the context of each of their countries, should learn to design and facilitate training sessions for others, focusing on how to convey the evaluation approach we work with and make it their own. By

working with professionals familiar with each of the cultural, social and organisational contexts in which they operate, greater adoption of the methodologies and tools is expected.

This training course will be accompanied by a teaching guide, which includes, for each specific topic, a series of practical activities and case studies in which participants can simulate the application of methodologies and tools. As with other training offered by EvalParticipativa, this course emphasises the importance of conducting evaluations in an ethical and culturally sensitive manner, respecting participants' local perspectives and knowledge. With the aim of professionalising the field of participatory evaluation, this project seeks to certify this training as a postgraduate qualification (a diploma course or specialisation), in order to validate participants' competence as trainers in participatory evaluation.

Lessons learned and future challenges

Many lessons emerge from EvalParticipativa's six-year experience. The diversity of training activities carried out, as well as the implementation of the teaching tools designed for strengthening capacities in participatory evaluation, allows us to highlight some lessons learned while also being aware of future challenges.

The opportunity to participate and the capacity to do so

As in any evaluation, a participatory approach should serve to learn, readjust and act by taking corrective measures to obtain better results; adding or removing activities, or simply changing the organisation's strategy. In other words, evaluation should serve to provide new and different knowledge for the development of policies and programmes. But just as important as the above is that a participatory evaluation should be capable of strengthening organisations so that they have greater control over their own development. And this is what we have observed across the great diversity of experiences documented by EvalParticipativa. Participatory evaluation also functions as a tool for improving the capacity of various stakeholders to reflect, analyse and propose solutions from their multiple perspectives.

The practice of accompanying evaluations, as well as developing capacities, has allowed us to appreciate two dynamics that are at play in ensuring the success — in terms of methodological and technical rigour — of an evaluation: the opportunity to participate and the capacity to participate. The first is determined by the institutional and political will of whoever designs and conducts an evaluation to create real spaces for participation; the second is determined mainly by the attitudes and skills that the various stakeholders connected with the evaluation process have developed, whether through their own experience or through

formal training such as that which we have developed at EvalParticipativa.

It has long been argued that, in order to achieve an adequate level of participation in an evaluation, it is a necessary and sufficient condition for the institution, programme or project to open up opportunities and channels for participation. That is, that the representatives of the different levels of the programme under evaluation should have a genuine willingness to undertake an evaluation of this nature, provide the resources needed for this type of process, and be open to listening to and adopting the recommendations that emerge from the evaluation. But we have learned that, in order to ensure an evaluation is relevant and useful for decision-making, it is necessary to initiate a process of competence development that gives the evaluation a truly participatory character, while also ensuring the quality and methodological rigour of the process.

Thus, capacity strengthening in participatory evaluation plays a decisive role in achieving, in concrete practice, a series of quality indicators, namely:

- suitability of the participation to the nature and experience of different stakeholders;
- proper handling of the wide range of tools that exist today;
- understanding that not everything depends on the tools but on the participatory commitment of those who facilitate the process, which is expressed in tolerance of error, the willingness to explain things again, and the readiness to revisit agreements and redesign the work plan;

- gaining clarity about the role of the facilitator, which involves motivating without pushing, reflecting with the group of stakeholders without predetermining conclusions, contributing ideas without imposing one's own, and asking questions without suggesting the answers; and
- having acquired the technical capacity to compensate for the participating groups' lack of experience with timely advice, so as to ensure that the participatory evaluation meets the standards of quality and methodological rigour required of any evaluation.

During these six years of EvalParticipativa we have learned that developing skills for participatory evaluation—in the public sector as well as in civil society organisations and the community of professionals—is decisive. For various entities, especially in the public sector, capacity development is a necessary condition for participatory evaluation processes to become a regular practice. The various training opportunities have made possible not only the acquisition and development of technical skills, but also the raising of awareness among the main actors in the evaluation ecosystem regarding the benefits of social participation and the need to institutionalise this practice across the different evaluation processes in the region.

Evaluating the training

Evaluating the results of a programme to strengthen professional capacities for participatory evaluation requires a comprehensive approach that considers

various aspects to ensure that the intervention has met its objectives and contributed to developing the expected competences. We have been able to evaluate the quality of the training, identifying areas for improvement and documenting lessons learned such as those we present in this chapter. However, assessing the capacity to influence new practices and the institutionalisation of this type of evaluation is a challenge for the future.

Each capacity development instance run by EvalParticipativa, in any of its formats, has had a final evaluation. This has generally addressed four aspects, namely:

- content (relevance, timeliness, applicability);
- methodology (the learning process, the tools shared, timing);
- coordination (facilitation of the teaching-learning process, teaching experience and ability, and a vocation and aptitude for teaching); and
- participation (people's involvement in the process and their commitment to the work before, during and after each training workshop).

The satisfaction surveys conducted to gauge the participants' perceptions of the programme's usefulness and effectiveness are encouraging, and the comparison between initial expectations and the results obtained is very positive. At the same time, the qualitative assessment of the training has consistently highlighted three positive aspects: the training programme is relevant and up to date; the methodology used is effective, with particular emphasis on learning

based on problem-solving, case studies and hands-on workshops; and the development of content was flexible and adapted to the needs and circumstances of each context and organisation. Likewise, it has been expressed that the training stimulated active participation throughout the entire process, which fostered a high level of commitment among participants during the programme.

Participants state having acquired a wide and varied range of competences; nevertheless, it has been difficult to assess their capacity to apply in real world contexts what they learned. It remains an outstanding task being able to measure whether there was an observable improvement in participants' professional performance after completing the training programme—especially in the case of training courses that form part of postgraduate programmes (diploma courses or specialisations)—. Evaluating whether participants have contributed more effectively to their participatory evaluation teams or projects following their participation in the programme is an issue to be tackled in the future. Similarly, it will be important to analyse the multiplier effect, once the training-of-trainers course has been implemented, by examining the extent to which participants are able to transfer or share what they have learned with colleagues in different settings and organisations.

EvalParticipativa's contribution to evaluation capacity development

We maintain, along with the entire evaluation community, that the openness to participation that different institutions are able to offer in order to conduct inclusive evaluations is conditioned by the respective political decisions that enable them. At the same time, we believe it is essential to insist on, commit to and work towards developing evaluation capacities that ensure the methodological rigour required of evaluation experiences involving social participation.

Although the supply of postgraduate courses in evaluation in the region has grown, their distribution and quality are uneven, with most concentrated in national capitals. When EvalParticipativa was born in early 2019, there were 10 master's programmes and 24 diplomas or specialist courses in Latin America, geared towards specialisation in theories and methods in the field of evaluation, with application in different areas of the social sector (education, health, rural development and social policy, among others) (Ghiano, 2021). Other training opportunities in evaluation were offered by international organisations such as CLEARLAC, the InterAmerican Development Bank, the World Bank and the Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Economic and Social Planning (ILPES), to which can be added the Foceval and Focelac projects (supported by DEval), as well as the evaluation capacity development activities led by the evaluation networks in the region (Peroni & Rodríguez Bilella, 2021).

For a significant proportion of young and emerging evaluators in Latin America, the cost of training courses represents a key impediment (Arévalo, 2016). This obstacle was effectively overcome in the training experiences generated by EvalParticipativa, since most carried no enrolment fee for participants, while also offering priority, free-of-charge places for interested individuals in general and for trainee evaluators in particular.

One lesson learned from these developments was the recognition that, since EvalParticipativa's training was oriented towards more practical forms or styles than those implemented by more formalised programmes, there was a risk of neglecting the development of theoretical capacity in the evaluation field as regards its participatory component, thereby undermining the academic strengthening of evaluation as a discipline. To address this, we adopted an explicit strategy of coordination and joint work with various postgraduate evaluation programmes in the region, developed a forum with several of them, and decided to publish this book as a relevant input for advanced training in evaluation.

Along these same lines, an immediate challenge we face is to advance in the capacity development initiatives in a more explicit and considered way so as to address the matters relating to the methodological

rigour of participatory evaluations. That is, to clarify the link between the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that guide it, making it possible to see the contrasts, coincidences and distances with respect to other evaluation approaches. Recognising the strongly interpretative character of participatory evaluation, delving deeper into the rigour of these evaluations will surely entail giving greater space to the content and practices of feminist, gender and human rights approaches, ethics in evaluation practice, as well as qualitative methodologies of social research.

The famous saying attributed to Benjamin Franklin, "Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn", neatly captures the spirit of the training aimed at strengthening capacities for evaluation with social participation that we have undertaken at EvalParticipativa. Our community has been a space for gathering and collective learning among representatives of public-sector and civil society organisations, academia and the NGOs, among others. All that has been achieved has been possible thanks to our joint effort, to challenges turned into reality, and to hopes for the construction of a more just and inclusive Latin American society where, one day, no one will be left behind.

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