

Participatory Planning Monitoring and Evaluation and Learning: Why it is important



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Introduction

As you read this white paper, consider your context and identify the challenges and experiences you relate to. The white paper on Participatory Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (PPMEL) consists of three parts: this document is the first. This part will focus on why PPMEL is essential, while the second part will focus on implementing Participatory Evaluation practice in your organisation. The third white paper on PPMEL will focus on the aspects of learning and downward accountability

Effective evaluations go hand in hand with planning, monitoring, and the willingness to learn. Ideally, every step of the project implementation must be participatory to create the ultimate impact for the people of interest and organisations. It is like a spiral of learning by doing. This white paper is, therefore, focused on PPMEL, not just evaluation.

“Participatory [planning], monitoring, evaluation and [learning] are not just a matter of using participatory techniques within a conventional monitoring and evaluation setting. It is about radically rethinking who initiates and undertakes the process, and who learns or benefits from the findings.”

Institute of Development Studies, 1998



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Importance of community participation as a development strategy and its evolution in Wilde Ganzen

We are convinced that lasting change only occurs when people living in poverty decide how their problems should be tackled and take ownership of the solutions. That is why we believe in a community-led approach at every step of the process. The voices and desires of the people of interest are central to the process of change. This philosophy is further developed in [the white paper on Community Participation](#) and reflected by the concept of Participatory Evaluation and in our [Theory of Change](#).

The background and context of Participatory Planning, Monitoring, and Learning Evaluation (PPMEL) in the context of sustainable development.

So, what is Participatory Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning?

PPMEL is an approach where stakeholders (beneficiaries and other relevant key actors) actively engage in all phases and play active roles in decision-making. Their contribution should include at least the following:

- 1** Organising a participatory open, inclusive and safe space for relevant stakeholders to participate from the start;
- 2** Enabling the primary stakeholders of interest (beneficiaries) to raise their voices about issues that matters to them. As well as empowering those in power to listen to the beneficiaries and to give due weight to their opinions. This means addressing power imbalances and taking time to invest in this participatory process;
- 3** Identifying expected long-term results *jointly*;
- 4** Identifying *jointly* relevant questions to measure success - key performance indicators;
- 5** Planning the monitoring and evaluation design *jointly*;
- 6** Choosing participatory methods of data collection which are applicable among all stakeholders (including beneficiaries);
- 7** Reaching a consensus about findings *jointly*;
- 8** Defining lessons learned collectively and preparing a joint action plan to improve impact.

Adhering to the above principles enhances the possibility of achieving long-lasting and positive impacts on the communities and the environment.



International vision/leading discussion/ideas about the topic to position it.

The concept of PPMEEL has been gaining traction within the international cooperation sector since 1990. This inclusive approach **prioritises community involvement** in planning and assessing project impact and making decisions based on collective learning. International discussions emphasise its potential to enhance **sustainability** by **aligning initiatives with local needs and values**. PPMEEL **addresses power imbalances** by **empowering underrepresented** voices as well as by **empowering those in power to listen** and give due weight to the voice of beneficiaries. It aims for more solid and just outcomes through inclusive decision-making.

Furthermore, PPMEEL promotes collective learning. It is constantly learning by doing with a focus on long term outcomes. Collaboration and knowledge-sharing with the beneficiaries and other stakeholders facilitate adaptive improvements in participatory project planning and implementation. It enhances joint responsiveness which is such an important competence in the unpredictable and complex, fast-changing context. Therefore PPMEEL promotes besides collective learning also collective adaptive management.



Navigation in complex and fast-changing circumstances with a focus on outcomes

Adaptative organisations or communities become important through learning and reflection in unpredictable and complex societies. Given the unpredictable, complex, and fast-changing society, focusing on long-term results (outcomes and impact) instead of short-term outputs and effects is essential. To navigate in a complex society towards those long term results, one must learn by doing and adapt to achieve the desired outcomes. Taking PPMEEL as your approach, the desired outcomes must be decided with the relevant stake-holders. Partners in Education Ethiopia aptly said: "It may take more time to involve the community in the projects, to organise and mobilise them. However, together, you are stronger, and you are also facing the future!" Read further here: [If we do what people can do themselves, we do not strengthen them.](#)

Often organisations focus on short term results, for instance the building of a school. But what if something comes in between unexpectedly. Nowadays it is more sustainable to focus on a long-term impact for instance 'all children in our village will have access to good primary education within 3 years'. By addressing long term desired change, you are always flexible to adjust your short term activities if unpredictable situations damage your plan. For instance a hurricane, a conflict, pandemic, a strike, it happens more often nowadays. A hurricane avoid you to build a school, but you can still adapt to the unfavourable context by offering children safe space and education kits for insance. Your project goal - ensuring access to education for all children- didn't fail in the new unplanned situation. And you are still able to evaluate with the community meaningful progress. Focussing on long term impact together with the community helps you also to address jointly the deeper root causes that need to be tackled to sincerely support lasting change.

See here the [Cinefin model](#). It explains the need to navigate towards complex outcomes and create space for adaptive action. It shows how crucial joint learning is to achieving complex outcomes. Therefore, evaluations to learn jointly are critical.



Goals of Participatory Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation and Learning

Participatory approaches support learning and reflection. They foster a deeper understanding of the community's needs, priorities, and experiences.

Through this, organisations can respond effectively to changing circumstances and challenges together with the community. The following arguments underpin the importance of embracing PPMEEL approaches:

- **Learning and reflections:** PPMEEL allows the organisation and its stakeholders to reflect on and learn from project results to improve the impact of future interventions.
- **Knowledge management:** Sustainable organisational learning and growth are established by creating shared knowledge among all stakeholders and using methods to develop knowledge and insights structurally.
- **Identifying outcomes and indicators by the people:** Only through the participation of all stakeholders can partners guarantee the identification of relevant outcomes, impact and related evaluation questions or indicators to measure, which form the foundation of the evaluation itself.
- **Stakeholder accountability:** Identifying the proper desired outcomes, best activities, and evaluation questions jointly and sharing the findings afterwards create accountability for the primary stakeholders instead of focusing on donor accountability. This will generate mutual trust in the possibility that change can happen. Trust in the facilitating organisation will grow! This way, individuals feel they have a stake in the successes and challenges of the project and organisation. Community members will experience that they are heard and seen. They have a stake in the successful change and feel committed to address the challenges jointly.
- **Ownership for primary stakeholders:** PPMEEL allows the stakeholders to control and own the evaluation process and creates a sense of ownership over the results. This makes that they won't be a victim anymore, but vital and active members of the community. They are the drivers of change.
- **Recognizing local community develops trust:** This approach builds confidence and empowerment among the local community by recognising local expertise and knowledge. Problems can be solved collectively. This helps to break down barriers. It builds trust and stronger relationships.
- **Engaged community in advocacy for their rights:** PPMEEL allows stakeholders to acquire or strengthen evaluation skills. Active participation results in better understanding of their environment and dynamics around development. This helps them to identify action steps to better advocate for policy changes.
- **Strengthened social capital:** Participatory approaches can strengthen social capital by involving primary project participants in PPMEEL processes. It lays the groundwork for more inclusive and resilient communities.
- **Transformative change:** Participatory PPMEEL gives stakeholders tools to transform their environment.

In summary, the goal of a more participatory approach in evaluation represents a transformative shift towards a more democratic, accountable, and sustainable way of working in development initiatives.



Ten Practical tools to work with PPMEEL in various aspects

Above and in the second white paper we described relevant aspects underpinning PPMEEL. Here we have selected a range and linked that to a concrete tool for further elaboration. This is not set in stone. PPMEEL is a learning journey from the beginning to the end focused on transformative and cocreating change.

1 Tool: Stakeholder mapping

Give voice to the people's priorities and concerns, being included and therefore see and hear different perspectives: To be inclusive and include as many voices as possible, stakeholder mapping should take place at the beginning of the intervention. It assesses the value of an intervention as perceived by (intended) beneficiaries, aiming to give voice to their priorities and concerns.

Tool stakeholder mapping: [for children, Change the Game.](#)

Toolkit to analyse power among stakeholders in communities: [Power Awareness Tool.](#)



2 Tool: How to create an open and safe space

Primary stakeholders (Beneficiaries) involved need to be facilitated in a way that they can speak freely and openly this means that they need to speak in their own language, the space is a safe space, and the questions are formulated in a way that they are understandable for the participants in the evaluation. The moderation is done by a local moderator who understands the values, local dynamics and its power balances. (S)he speaks the local language(s).

Tool: [Open space](#) is a facilitation method to give space to all people of interest in change.

3 Tool: How to develop a Theory

PPMEL could be focused on change over a short term as well as over a longer period. The change could happen in a specific geographical area or within a sector. Change however happens always at, individual level, organizational level, societal level.

Tool: *The Theory of Change*) is a methodological tool to analyze and evaluate social change that an organization aims to create. It shows a causal pathway from inputs required for specific activities that lead to tangible outputs and outcomes. The more it is developed in a participatory way, the more impactful. [See here](#).

4 Tool: How to work Bottom-up in PPMEL

Bottom-up: Learning and well-designed knowledge management are ensured from the start. Additionally, a bottom-up assessment evaluates the value systems of the local population. Over time, the best and worst interventions are selected, and their benefits are thoroughly analysed.

How: Outcome mapping: It would be good to include all stakeholders in the planning phase to map outcomes (results) and the planned activities in a participatory way. See: [Outcome mapping | Better Evaluation](#).

5 Tool: How to support collectiveness from the start

Collectively the stakeholders define the planning of the intervention and evaluation in terms of mapping the outcomes and developing indicators, timing of the interviews/focus group discussions, design of the entire evaluation. There is joint consensus.

How: Developing SPICED indicators; To define the indicators jointly it is best to do this in a participatory way. The SPICED indicators are helpful in this. [From S.M.A.R.T. indicators to CREAM and SPICED. | LinkedIn](#).



6 Tool: How to harvest outcome to understand realised change collective

Outcome Harvesting collects ("harvests") evidence of what has changed ("outcomes") then working backwards, determines whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes. There is joint consensus about the findings: [See here](#).

How? The most significant change MSC: There are several participatory methods to harvest and learn from the realised outcomes/change. One strong example is the exercise of Most Significant Change. The MSC technique is a participatory monitoring and evaluation method that involves collecting and interpreting stories of significant changes resulting from a program or intervention. [See here](#).

9 Tool: How to move 'from single agency or project towards geographical and sectoral change'

This is an approach to outcome/impact evaluation that radically moves away from a focus on a single agency, project or program. It takes a particular area and reflects -through different groups of people- on interventions that have taken place and what has changed over a period.

How? PADEV is a impactful and thorough bottom-up assessment based on value systems of population in the area: [see here](#) at Better Evaluation.

7 Tool: How to take/accept risks, create time and patience for a successful joint process

Save the Children developed 9 principles to communicate well with children. Those apply for community members too. Among them take the time. Worth to read!

[The Nine Basis Requirements](#). [See here](#).

[This tool supports you to take risks](#). [See here](#).

8 Tool: How to support collectiveness from the start

Which focuses on strengths rather than on weaknesses - quite different to many approaches to evaluation which focus on deficits and problems. Recognise and celebrate successes as well as failures because both can be learned from.

[See more at Better Evaluation: Appreciative inquiry](#).

10 Tool: Community Led Development

Would you like to dive deeper into Community led development?

"Community-Led Development is a development approach in which local community members work together to identify goals that are important to them, develop and implement plans to achieve those goals, and create collaborative relationships internally and with external actors—all while building on community strengths and local leadership. [See the toolkit](#).



Conclusions

PPMEL supports inclusive, transparent, and effective project management by fostering inclusivity and transparency at all levels through active stakeholder engagement. This approach enhances ownership, accountability, and adaptability, ensures diverse perspectives, informs decision-making and drives continuous improvement. PPMEL aligns project outcomes with community needs. It helps to prioritise collectively by leveraging local knowledge and fostering collaborative environments. As the development sector increasingly recognises the value of stakeholder engagement, adopting PPMEL practices is beneficial and essential for sustainable and impactful development. Embracing this methodology paves the way for more responsive, resilient and equitable project management and outcomes. And more over 'it contributes to emphasise the insights, leadership and ownership of the people who are living and experience issues at the community level. It supports their work to create lasting change in the systems. 'Recognising the grass roots knowledge and experiences as well as their deep commitment and desire to have human dignity, will also lead you to the deeper root causes that underly the critical issues they seek to address.'

