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Using Participatory Methods for More Responsive Project Design and Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

Participatory methods expand the role and voice of clients in program design, implementation, and evaluation. When well-managed and resourced, they can empower refugee clients and improve services. Participation is a continuum: it can range from *informing* to *consulting* to *full ownership*. Approaches along the continuum vary by time and resource commitment as well as skills needed for both staff and clients. This guide discusses the participation continuum; how to support successful participatory engagement; specific methods and when to use them; and resources for learning more about the power, potential, and practicality of participatory methods.

Participation as a Continuum

Participation is a continuum, and each method along the continuum has its benefits and drawbacks. Different levels of participation are going to be feasible at different times for each individual organization or program. Participation may not always be feasible in every case. But it is useful to remember the range of participation approaches and how you may be able to include them.

Participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methods seek to increase client voice, agency, or power in programs. They result in programs that are more responsive and appropriate for client needs.

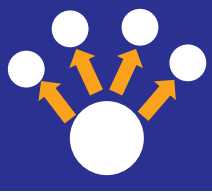
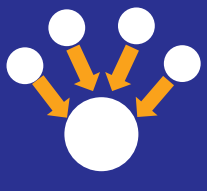
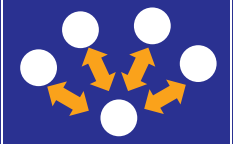
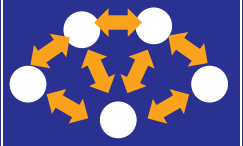
	Increasing participation and client influence				
	Inform	**Consult**	**Involve**	**Collaborate**	**Empower**
					
Goal	Provide balanced and objective information to clients in a timely manner	Obtain clients' feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives, and decisions	Ensure clients' concerns and aspirations are considered and understood	Partner with clients in each aspect of decision making	Place final decision making in the hands of clients
Promise	"We will keep you informed."	"We will listen to and acknowledge your concerns."	"We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are reflected in decisions."	"We will look to you for advice and innovation and will incorporate as much as possible."	"We will implement what you decide or support your implementation."
Examples	▪ Email ▪ Handout ▪ Website ▪ One-way communication	▪ Meeting ▪ Open house ▪ Survey ▪ Comment box	▪ Workshop ▪ Interactive design activities ▪ Two-way communication	▪ Advisory group ▪ Co-design and consensus ▪ Networked communication	▪ Task force ▪ Delegated decisions ▪ Peer-to-peer communication

Figure 1. The continuum of participation, showing varying levels of involvement.

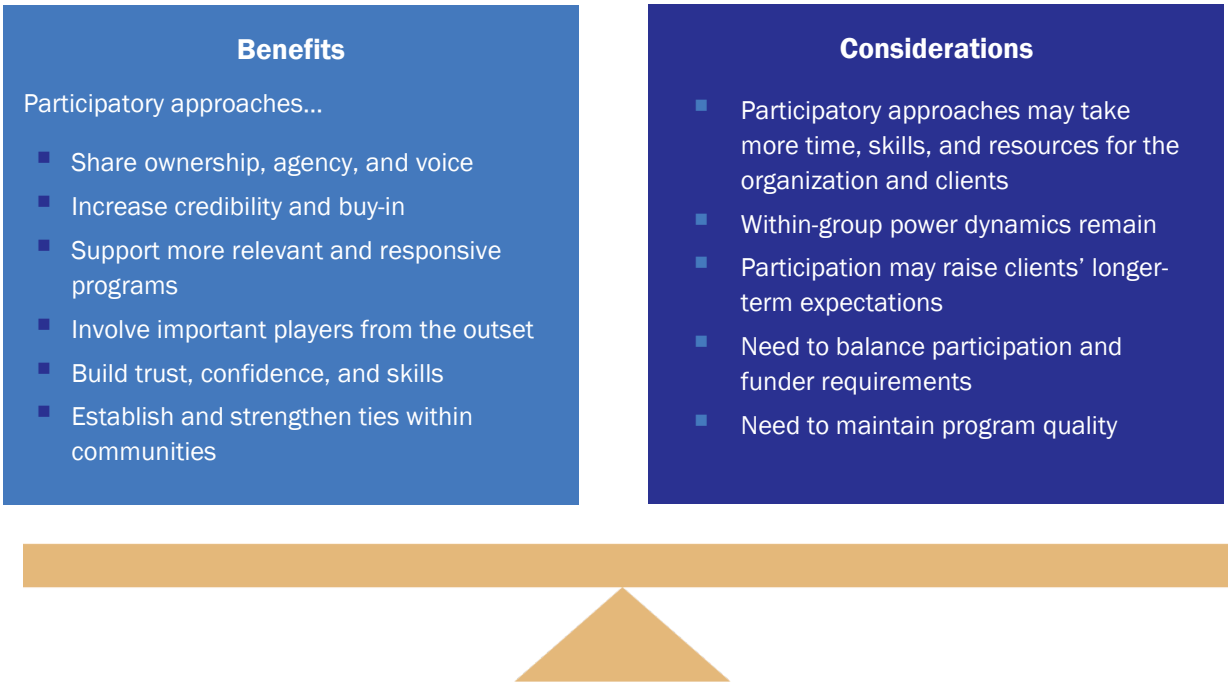
The table above lists **five forms of participation** in the context of program design and M&E.[1] On one end of this continuum, under *Inform*, are some basic forms of participation. These focus on keeping clients and communities up to date. While they typically use one-way communication, practices like keeping clients "in the loop," consistent information sharing, and transparency can build trust.

On the other end of the continuum, under *Empower,* are approaches in which clients take the lead, with support and resources, and decide what is important to them. Empowering approaches have the potential to be transformative for clients, communities, and the agencies and projects that serve them.

You might use approaches across the spectrum for different components or aspects of your project. Here are a few tips to get started:

- Think of participation in levels, each with its own benefits and limitations.
- You can start by integrating smaller, discrete opportunities for participation to grow the confidence, comfort, and skill level of both client-participants and staff-facilitators.
- Remember that when done with respect, intentionality, planning, and follow-through, all levels of participation are steps toward greater client agency and more responsive, appropriate programming.

[1] Table adapted from International Association for Public Participation (2018). *IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation*. https://www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/Spectrum_8.5x11_Print.pdf and from *Vancouver Mayor's Engaged City Task Force Final Report*. (2014). https://wayback.archive-it.org/8849/20190402030021/https://vancouver.ca/news-calendar/mayor-s-engaged-city-task-force-releases-final-report.aspx.



Balancing Benefits and Challenges

Engaging clients in participatory approaches can often build new skills and can increase confidence, self-efficacy, and group cohesion, which are transferable to other contexts. It can also lead to greater credibility for your agency within the community and cultivate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of client experience than more traditional approaches to monitoring and evaluation.

However, there are some important limitations to keep in mind:

- Participation without "closing the loop" or maintaining accountability to participants can do real harm to client trust.
- Participatory processes are often more resource intensive.
- They may require more time and additional preparation and skills (e.g., facilitation), to ensure robust participation and to balance complex relationships among participants.
- You may need to make the case for these new approaches to funders, including considerations for maintaining the quality of data collected from participatory approaches.

Let's take a closer look at some specific participatory methods to consider incorporating into your program design and M&E.

Opportunities for Integrating Participatory Methods

Understanding Context and Assessing Needs

Mapping methods give clients opportunities to share their perspectives on aspects of the world around them. For example, clients might develop neighborhood maps highlighting particular types of resources, such as social services; safe or welcoming areas; or patterns of movement by sex, age, nationality, income, or other characteristics. Maps might also be used to chart a journey, such as from country of origin to the United States, or the movements of a typical day.

In addition to these material aspects, mapping methods can also bring out more experiential aspects of clients' lives. Maps can be used to explore communities' histories or ways of making meaning. This can be done by inviting clients to annotate maps with history and experiences; to reflect on what's missing and included in their maps; to understand differences among their maps; or to narrate stories related to their maps. To learn more, see the University of Manchester's guide Methods for Change: Participatory Mapping.

Timeline methods are similar but offer opportunities to explore client experiences temporally rather than geographically. Timelines, or "time use" approaches, might cover a longer period, such as the first six months after arrival, or a more focused period, such as

a typical day or week. They can also be used to explore different aspects of a time period, such as "times when you felt empowered" or "times when you felt excluded."

Both approaches provide a useful jumping-off point for exploring clients' needs, and recommendations for meeting those needs, from their own perspectives. The creative products of these exercises and clients' narratives surrounding those products are both valuable sources of data.

Photography-based methods, such as **PhotoVoice**, use visuals as a jumping-off point for similar explorations of client experiences. In the past, participants used disposable or instant cameras to highlight aspects of their lives in response to a prompt. More recent approaches use clients' own smartphones or low-cost digital cameras. Clients might be asked to capture something meaningful in their immediate surroundings during a session; to document aspects of their lives over the course of a day or week; or even to tell a story by selecting existing photographs, either their own or from sources like magazines.

For example, the photos below were taken by newcomers in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in relation to the guiding question: *How do newcomer families find and use programs and services for their young children?*[2]

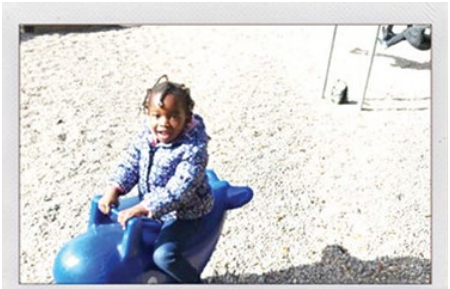


Photo 7. The power of play

Photo 16. My view of safety is different from yours

In each case, photography-based methods give clients the power to control what is in and out of the frame and thus to control the focus of discussion. These methods enable the use of indirect forms of expression such as metaphor and symbolism, which may be well-suited to sensitive or complex topics that are difficult to verbalize directly. They can also result in powerful visual products for communicating to a range of audiences (with client permission). To learn more, see United for Prevention's Facilitator's Toolkit.

Decision Making, Ranking, and Priority Setting

Pairwise ranking is one method for understanding preferences and priorities within a group or moving toward group decision making. It typically occurs after all options have been discussed and are well-understood by clients. After discussion, each decision option is listed across the side and top of a chart, forming a matrix (as in page 9 of this guide). This allows each option to be paired with each of the other options. For each pair, clients give their preference between the two options. The outcome of this process is a ranked set of options, reflecting clients' priorities in greater depth than a typical direct vote approach.

Card-based methods are a flexible way to gather perspectives from a large group in an informal, non-confrontational way. These methods focus on deliberation and cultivating shared understanding. Some card-based approaches support decision making, prioritization, and consensus building. They often require few resources and can be narrative or visual. Categories or choices can be pre-determined by staff and ranked and sorted by clients, or clients may also have a voice in brainstorming and defining choices and categories. These approaches can also be used to "score" services or providers.

For example, card sorting involves clients placing cards with written or drawn concepts into relevant categories, or in order by preference, time, or some other characteristic. The activity can be done by individuals or groups and requires only pen and paper. Sticky notes, index cards, or scrap paper all work well. As with most participatory methods, the process of exploring options and decisions is critical as an opportunity for

[2] Fakhari, N., McIsaac, J. L. D., Feicht, R., Reddington, S., Brigham, S., Mandrona, A., McLean, C., Harkins, M. J., & Stirling Cameron, E. (2023). Looking through the lens: A photovoice study examining access to services for newcomer children. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, *18*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2023.2255176

agency as well as data. To learn more, see Participatory Methods' Card Writing and Sorting.

Evaluation and Program Improvement

Most Significant Change (MSC) is a structured approach to identifying meaningful change, originally designed by Rick Davies and Jessica Dart in the 1990s. At the most basic level, it gives clients the opportunity to express the most significant change in their lives from or during a certain point in time (e.g., since the start of your program).

While the formal, documented MSC approach is highly structured, teams often use this tool in a range of creative, flexible, and informal ways. Frequent modifications include sharing stories of change through narrative, skits, photography, song, or in written form; explicitly exploring both positive and negative changes; or crafting a new central question to prompt reflection, such as "the most significant change in your community." To learn more, see Intrac's MSC Guide.

Similarly, **Outcome Harvesting** draws on clients' perspectives to understand outcomes and impacts. In the Outcome Harvesting approach, clients are provided general areas or categories of potential outcomes. Participants then give descriptions of their own outcomes and experiences in each category (as well as other categories they identify). You can also work backwards from these outcomes to project activities in order to develop or validate a theory of change. To learn more, see Intrac's Outcome Harvesting guide.

Most Significant Change and Outcome Harvesting are both useful in exploring unintended outcomes of a particular project. They are also useful for pilot projects and other projects with less certain outcomes.

Closing the Loop

Interactive **Data Walks** are one way to "close the loop" and bring client data back to them for discussion and decision making. In a Data Walk, key data is presented in a visually engaging exhibit or poster session. Data Walks are most successful when accompanied by resources that support engagement, such as worksheets or discussion prompts (e.g., "What surprised you?"). These questions can form an entry point into the data for individuals, pairs, or small groups.

Data Walks are also useful in communicating client feedback to other internal and external stakeholders. To learn more, see the Urban Institute's Research Report.

Conclusion

If you are planning to engage clients in participatory approaches to project design and M&E, carefully consider the benefits and drawbacks of each approach within your program's context. Remember that participation is a continuum and that you can start by integrating smaller opportunities for participation as you build staff and client capacity. This guide highlights various opportunities for integrating participatory methods into needs assessment/context analysis, decision making, program improvement, and closing the loop with clients.

Resources

Liberating Structures: This set of participatory approaches cultivates new ways of group working, planning, decision making, and reflection.

Feedback Labs: This initiative provides tools for planning and managing feedback processes, as well as case studies and guidance.

How can participatory research methods be used to improve research with refugees?: This Switchboard evidence summary presents evidence for how and why to use participatory methods in research contexts.

How to Develop and Run a Community Advisory Board (CAB) Meeting: This blog post by Switchboard and Boston College describes the process of establishing a CAB, recruiting members, and addressing challenges.

Community Needs Assessments with Newcomers: This Switchboard guide offers concrete tips for working with communities to identify and understand their needs.

To learn more about Switchboard, visit SwitchboardTA.org.

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