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Opportunities and Limitations for Adolescent Participation in Research – Lessons Learned from the End Child Marriage Flagship Evaluation in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increased importance of downward accountability and the inclusion of program participants in all stages of program cycle management, the application of participatory research methods in program evaluations is still limited. This paper discusses the trade-offs between non-participatory and participatory evaluation approaches in international development cooperation and explores how program evaluations can meaningfully engage program participants while also adhering to established standards of academic rigor and pragmatic feasibility. The paper draws lessons and shares learnings from the End Child Marriage Flagship Evaluation, which integrated 'conventional' evaluation approaches and participatory research to meaningfully include adolescent program participants. Finally, the paper compares experiences of the evaluation to other participatory program evaluations and links lessons learned to a broader discussion about prerequisites and trade-offs for applying participatory evaluation approaches and calls to re-imagine conventional evaluation standards to enable program participants to engage in a meaningful way.

Keywords: participatory evaluation, applied research, adolescent participation in research methodological paper, qualitative evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of program participants in the different stages of program cycle management has increasingly gained traction in international development cooperation. Today, the human rights-based approach and its principles of meaningful and inclusive participation of and accountability towards rights holders have been solidly anchored within a vast framework of laws, norms, standards, and principles enshrined in international core human rights treaties and declarations. At the same time, practitioners have learned more and more to embrace the complexity of program environments and the need for localized, context-specific solutions [1] [2]. This has put pressure on duty bearers such as program donors and implementers to

meaningfully include program participants in their actions, including the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of development programs [3].

However, commissioners and consultants of program evaluations have yet to catch up when it comes to mainstreaming participatory research methods. While innovative evaluation approaches such as the Participatory Impact Assessment and Learning Approach (PIALA) and Systemic Action Research (SAR) have been piloted successfully [4] [5], participatory research – however 'enduring and evolving' – remains firmly situated at the margins of mainstream evaluations [2]. One explanation for this is that counterfactual-based approaches using (quasi-)experimental methods are firmly established as gold standards for program impact evaluations. Accordingly, critics of participatory evaluations underline their lack of statistical rigor and objectiveness [4]. Proponents of participatory research, on the other hand, condemn conventional evaluation approaches that limit the participation of program participants to their consultation during data collection [3] as nominal, disingenuous, and tokenistic [6] [7] [8]. This leaves the impression that evaluations can either be participatory and fail standards of academic rigor and pragmatic feasibility or conventional and thereby pseudo-participatory.

This paper discusses the trade-offs between conventional and participatory evaluation approaches and explores how program evaluations can ensure adherence to ethical and human rights standards while also adhering to established standards of academic rigor and pragmatic feasibility. The paper first introduces modes and categorizations of participatory research in evaluations. It then describes the application of different participatory research methods in the End Child Marriage Flagship Program (ECM Flagship) Evaluation which integrated conventional and participatory evaluation methods. We then share lessons learned related to the opportunities and limitations of applying participatory approaches during the different phases of the evaluation.

We found that - within the constraints of academic rigor and pragmatic feasibility - there are more opportunities for enabling participation during the data collection and dissemination phases and fewer opportunities during the planning and analysis phases of the evaluation. Observations during data collection also indicated that participatory research, even in its 'lowest' form – consultation - has the potential to empower program participants. Experience also underlined the importance of considering and testing whether specific participatory research methods are sensitive towards the socio-cultural context and established power dynamics in order to engage program participants meaningfully in the evaluation.

Finally, the paper compares experiences of the evaluation to those of other participatory evaluations and links lessons learned to the broader discussion on prerequisites and trade-offs for applying participatory evaluation approaches and calls to re-imagine evaluation standards to enable program participants to engage in a meaningful way.

MODES AND PRACTICES OF PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN PROGRAM EVALUATIONS

The term 'participatory evaluation' can cover a wide range of different modes of participation, which can differ in terms of what is understood by 'participation', whose participation is sought, what it is that those people are involved in, and how. Using participatory approaches in program evaluations generally means involving stakeholders in specific aspects of the evaluation process, in particular, program participants or those affected by the program [8]. In

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this paper, we limit the focus of the participatory approach to the involvement of program participants, often called beneficiaries in international development cooperation.[1] Program participants can be involved in different roles and at different stages of a participatory evaluation: from the planning (evaluation design) through data collection, analysis, review, and revision, to dissemination and utilization of findings. The mode of participation - dependent on the extent of their roles and responsibilities within the evaluation - can be categorized into consultative, collaborative, and program participant-led approaches[2].

To this day, conventional evaluations tend to reduce the participation of program participants to a consultative approach during data collection, where they act as informants on the program within a predetermined, externally defined, and often standardized framework to measure success established by external experts who are meant to take a detached, impartial assessment of the program [3]. Critics have branded this approach tokenistic or even manipulative [6] [7] [8]. However, participatory approaches can also significantly expand the role of program participants. They can co-plan and manage the evaluation process, support or lead the development of the evaluation design and methodology, data collection, analysis and dissemination, and subsequent action. In addition, participatory evaluation planning and design tends to be inductive and adaptive, the collection and analysis process is often iterative, prioritizing qualitative judgments over quantitative indicators [3]. Table 1 describes the key characteristics of conventional and fully participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches as described by Gijit [3].

Table 1: Key characteristics of conventional and participatory M&E

	Conventional M&E	**Participatory M&E**
Who plans and manages the process	Senior managers or outside experts	Local people, project staff, managers, and other stakeholders, often helped by a facilitator
Role of 'primary stakeholders' (program participants)	Provide information only	Design and adapt the methodology, collect and analyze data, share findings, and link them to action
How success is measured	Externally defined, mainly quantitative indicators	Internally defined indicators, including more qualitative judgments
Research approach	Predetermined	Adaptive

Source: table adapted from Gijit [3]

Evaluation commissioners and managers need to consider a number of trade-offs when deciding on the mode and extent of participation in program evaluations. Ethical considerations, rigor, and feasibility are three key factors that determine opportunities and limitations for participatory program evaluations.

Ethical considerations include the considerations on the importance the evaluation puts on the adherence to a human rights-based approach, which recognizes program participants as key actors in their own development rather than as passive recipients of aid and generally

[1] While the article draws comparisons and conclusions for the involvement of program participants in evaluations in general, it focuses on depicting the experiences and lessons learned from the ECM Flagship evaluation related to efforts around the inclusion of the program's primary target group: adolescent girls.

[2] Categorization adapted from UNICEF [9]

considers participation, empowerment, and bottom-up processes, as good programming practices [10].

On the other hand, evaluations need to apply a rigorous research approach to ensure the reliability, and validity of evaluation results. Impact evaluations are still dominated by standards of statistical rigor and conventional concepts of validity and reliability which leave little room for participation. Accordingly, critics of participatory evaluations stress their subjectivity and lack of guidance and quality control to ensure rigorous research. However, the gold standard of counterfactual-based approaches using (quasi-) experimental methods has been challenged by criticizing their reductionist focus on attributable impacts and their difficulties in working in complex environments.

Finally, it is also pragmatic considerations that determine the feasibility of participatory program evaluations. Considerations include the technical capacity and interest of program participants, as well as access to available time and budget. In general, it is understood that participatory approaches to evaluations require more time and money than conventional approaches [9] [15].

The ECM Flagship evaluation tried to navigate ethical and pragmatic considerations and academic rigor by incorporating conventional and traditional evaluation approaches within the different phases of the evaluation.

DEVELOPING A PARTICIPATORY DESIGN FOR THE ECM FLAGSHIP EVALUATION

In 2022 the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) commissioned an external evaluation to assess the organization's 'End Child Marriage (ECM) Flagship Result Program. The program is implemented by government partners (as duty bearers) and targets adolescent girls aged 11 to 19 (as rights holders and primary target group) . It aims to contribute to a society free of child marriage by 2025, where girls use their potential, enjoy their rights, and thrive in life.

The formative evaluation aimed to provide evidence of the program's achievements and share learnings and recommendations to inform future actions of UNICEF and its partners. The evaluation used an embedded mixed-method design, where quantitative secondary data was included to answer research questions within a predominantly qualitative evaluation. Qualitative research included primary data collection among program participants and implementers through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews and was complemented by secondary qualitative data analysis of program documents and other literature on child marriage. The evaluation was also supposed to apply participatory methods throughout the different stages of the evaluation.

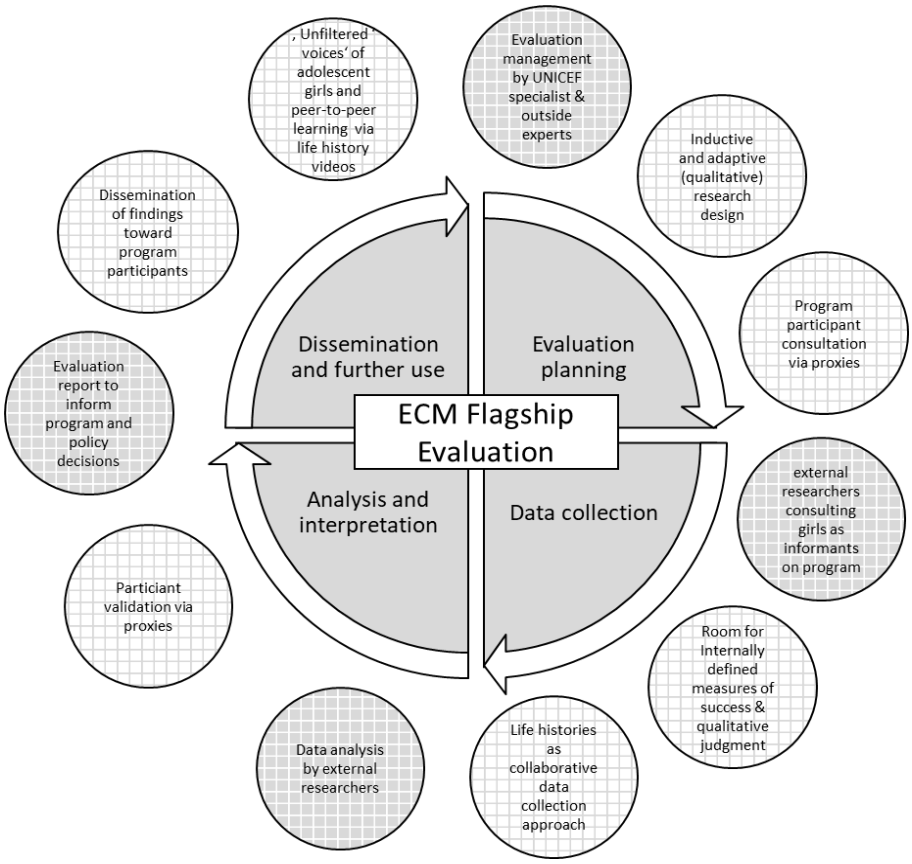
Purpose of The Participatory Research Approach

To determine the scope of the participatory research approach, it is important to reflect on its purpose for the evaluation [8]. In the case of the ECM Flagship Evaluation, the purpose of the participatory approach was strongly rooted in ethical considerations, in particular UNICEF's adherence to principles of accountability and human rights, which mandates key stakeholders, including girls and boys, to be engaged at relevant stages of the evaluation [10]. In addition,

both UNICEF and the external evaluators[3] acknowledged that the inclusion of adolescent girls would improve the robustness and reliability of evaluation findings. Based on this understanding, a methodology was developed to meaningfully include adolescent girls in the program evaluation within its time and budgetary constraints.

Scope and Methodology of the Participatory Research

The evaluation merged conventional and more progressive methods to participation by applying a mix of consultative and cooperative research throughout the different phases of the evaluation. Graphic 1 below describes the mixed methods used throughout the different evaluation phases.



Graphic 1: Conventional and participatory methods in the ECM Flagship Evaluation

As with conventional evaluations, the overall planning and management of the evaluation was led by a UNICEF evaluation specialist and an external evaluation team, who (in consultation with other stakeholders) also decided on the overall framework for the evaluation. A consultative approach was adopted during the planning phase by including a reference group of young female activists to review and provide feedback on the evaluation design.[4] Considering that the evaluation was by nature formative, UNICEF also opted against a quantitative design that measures attributable impact, for a predominantly qualitative design, that allows more

[3] The evaluation was conducted by the Center for Evaluation and Development (C4ED).

[4]The consultation consisted of two feedback rounds at different stages of the planning phase that included a presentation of the draft evaluation design, followed by a semi-structured focus group discussion.

room for program participants to individually define and judge the relevance and effectiveness of the program.

For the data collection, the evaluation team decided on a mix of consultative and cooperative research methods. While focus group discussions with adolescent girls[5] can be considered a conventional, consultative approach toward participatory evaluations, the collection of life histories attempted to implement a complementary, collaborative approach. As a research method, life histories can be used to shift the power imbalance between the researcher and the researched by empowering the research participants to narrate their own stories in their own time and to provide their own interpretation of their lives. In a collaborative approach, life histories merge the process of data collection, analysis and sense-making. As Söderström [11] describes: "Telling your life history creates meaning in itself and therefore it becomes part of the meaning-making process we as researchers are interested in."

Analysis of interviews and secondary data was conducted in a conventional way, that is, by the external evaluators. In addition, the validation and sense-making process included a review and discussion of findings by the reference group of young female activists. While they provided a detailed report with policy and program recommendations for UNICEF and partners, the evaluation team also discussed how findings could be meaningfully disseminated among and potentially used by the adolescent program participants. The evaluation team decided to share the girls' accounts of child marriage, presented in animated videos showcasing their life stories. These videos can be utilized by the program to enhance participant feedback, amplify their voices, and encourage peer-to-peer learning.

IMPLEMENTING PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION: LESSONS LEARNED

For the application of the agreed upon participatory research methods, the evaluation team experienced a number of expected and unexpected challenges and achievements throughout the different phases of the evaluation. Limitations and opportunities for participatory research, as experienced by the evaluation team, are described below.

Participatory Evaluation Planning

Unlike conventional evaluations, which limit decisions on evaluation design and methodology to evaluation commissioners and external evaluators, the ECM Flagship evaluation tried to involve program participants in the planning phase but still encountered several challenges to meaningfully involving them. Adolescent girls who participated in the program tended to live in remote rural areas with no access to the internet or phones. This made access to program participants during the evaluation's planning phase a challenge considering time and budget constraints. As a possible solution, UNICEF decided to explore involving young female activists from Addis Ababa in the evaluation. Those female activists were studying or had recently graduated from university and were engaged in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. This provided the opportunity to consider views of young Ethiopian women interested in female empowerment to meaningfully contribute to the evaluation design taking into account their knowledge, capacities, and interests as well as the evaluation's budgetary constraints. In addition, UNICEF explored their interest and buy-in into the program and its

[5] Mirroring the design of the program, focus group discussions were held separately with two different age cohorts, married and unmarried girls, and in-school and out-of-school girls.

evaluation to potentially mobilize them for the dissemination of findings and further action. We found that the contributions of young female activists were most valuable for ethical considerations and determining practical steps for field work, such as identifying safe spaces and stratification criteria for girls' focus groups in the light of 'do no harm' and potential negative effects of the research.

However, the involvement of female activists also had several limitations. The activists did not necessarily share the same characteristics and experiences as adolescent program participants, which included uneducated girls from often lower socio-economic and of diverse socio-cultural backgrounds different from those of the activists. Accordingly, the mobilization of young activists could not be considered a good proxy for the participation of adolescent program participants. We also found that the interest and contributions of young female activists were limited regarding the overall framework and design of the evaluation. One explanation can be that the overall evaluation framework was predetermined and theory-based, aiming to test the program's existing Theory of change (ToC). As such the evaluation design was rather abstract and seemed to make a certain scientific knowledge and interest a prerequisite for becoming meaningfully involved in the fine-tuning of the research approach during the later stages of the planning process.

Participatory Data Collection

Effects of Participant Consultation:

As expected, the evaluation team found that focusing on consulting adolescent girls increased the validity and reliability of research findings. Focus group discussions provided an unfiltered insight into the perceived relevance and effectiveness of the ECM Flagship from the perspective of the program's primary stakeholders and enabled the research team to properly triangulate information. As an example, interviews with adolescents found that adolescent girls were more often active decision-makers toward marriage than adult community members and program implementers had assumed. The inductive nature of the qualitative research also opened the evaluation up to adapting initial indicators/measures based on the program participant's feedback during data collection. This enabled the evaluation team to explore unintended program effects, identify and challenge underlying program assumptions, and discover external factors that undermined program effectiveness. In very few cases, researchers observed limited interest of program participants in the evaluation. This was particularly true when they were coping with ongoing emergencies. In those circumstances, interview respondents tended to veer away from the evaluation's scope of research, elaborating on their more immediate needs, such as drought management and the need to acquire water.

In addition to strengthening the validity and reliability of evaluation findings, the evaluation team also made observations that indicated that their approach towards participatory research contributed to the empowerment of adolescent girls within their own communities. The research challenged prevalent gender roles in several ways. The evaluation openly prioritized interviews with adolescent girls over those of other (male and adult) community members, thus openly validating the importance of the experiences and views of adolescent girls within their communities. While there is no evidence whether this approach indeed had any effect on visited communities, informal interviews did confirm that the approach transcended current socio-cultural norms and practices where adolescent girls rarely spoke out in public or were

approached outside of their families to be asked for their experiences and opinions, including recommendations on policies and public service provision.

Researchers also observed a sense of enjoyment and pride among interviewed girls for speaking out publicly during the focus group discussions. Girls vividly enjoyed demonstrating their increased self-efficacy (a reported effect of the program's gender clubs), showing researchers their public speaking capabilities, and contrasting them to their low self-esteem and timidity before the program. In this sense, one could say that the evaluation promoted social behavior change and contributed to girls' empowerment in the same way the program under evaluation did.

Finally, there is some evidence that suggests that the predominantly female research team acted as role models for adolescent girls. Informal interviews and observations confirmed that female researchers were highly esteemed among the visited rural communities, being associated with higher education, money, and power. As an example, when asked about her wishes for the future of her daughter, one interviewed mother stated that she wanted her daughter to become like the female researcher who interviewed her.

These observations show that – despite their bad reputation among participatory research practitioners - consultative research approaches are not by default tokenistic and may even be able to contribute to the empowerment of and behavior change among program participants. However, it needs to be stressed that these findings and observations are merely indicative and would require further research to validate. In addition, it needs to be stressed that promoting the emancipation of program participants was not an objective of the participatory evaluation design and can best described as a positive side effect of the research.

Opportunities and Limitations of Life Histories:

The evaluation team needed to consider different trade-offs for including life histories in the evaluation. On the one hand, as a collaborative research approach, the life histories permitted a higher level of participation for program participants. On the other hand, collecting life histories tends to be a time-consuming process, and the applicability of individuals' stories to broader contexts is limited. To mitigate the latter, the evaluation team decided to add life histories as a complementary source of data in addition to focus group discussions with adolescent girls. This way, it was ensured that evaluation questions could be answered even if it turned out that life histories had little to contribute to the evaluation's quest for more general truths. To work within the time and budgetary constraints of the evaluation, it was decided to limit the life histories to a one-time interview, leaving room for the interview to span several hours.

Throughout the data collection, the evaluation team struggled to apply the method of life histories. Challenges revolved around the technical capacities of the researchers, the available time for data collection, and the compatibility of the research method with existing norms and power dynamics. The question of compatibility was raised early on, during the piloting of the evaluation methods. The evaluation team originally intended to use the drawing exercise of a lifeline, which was supposed to facilitate the elicitation and interpretation of information. However, in several instances, both researchers and respondents remarked feeling uncomfortable with the drawing exercise. Having identified this participatory visual method to

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be more a barrier than a facilitator for the research, the evaluation team decided to abandon the drawing exercise.

More challenges were encountered during data collection. Despite the training of experienced qualitative researchers, it was observed that during data collection, both interviewers and respondents tended to slip back into established patterns where the researcher asked, and the respondent answered to interview questions. There can be several explanations for this. While the evaluation did employ experienced qualitative Ethiopian researchers, their experience was limited to employing conventional consultative research approaches. Difficulties in accessing remote areas also put more time constraints on the data collection than anticipated, leaving researchers with less time to collect life histories than planned. At the same time, researchers found it difficult to incentivize adolescent respondents to a point where they would take over and lead the interview. The most plausible explanation for this can be found in prevailing cultural norms and practices as well as certain evaluation design choices. In communities that traditionally provide limited incentives for girls to speak out their minds in public or toward perceived authorities and which have established hierarchies and power dynamics between women and men, children and adults, donors and beneficiaries, the evaluation team found it difficult, if not impossible, to break through established patterns in which the researchers/adults/perceived donor lead the discussion and the respondent/child(beneficiary follow and answers to questions. The training provided for the researchers and the available time to conduct life histories turned out to be insufficient to break these patterns within a one-off research assignment.

The school setting in which many interviews were conducted seemed to cement a dynamic where researchers acted as teachers who tested students on what they had learned from the program under evaluation. The experience underlined the challenge of finding safe spaces that could help empower girls to lead the research. In this sense, the evaluation did not manage to fully apply the research method of life histories, as they were only partially participant-led.

Analysis, Dissemination, and Utilization of Findings

Because of qualitative research's greater openness towards program participants' value judgments and internally defined measurements, data analysis needed to consider limitations of generalizability of findings, applying the concept of transferability instead of external validity. While analysis of data was conducted by the external evaluation team, validation and sense-making of findings included a variety of stakeholders. Similar to the planning stage, research findings were presented and discussed with young female activists during this process, the evaluation team observed moderate interest of the activists in the evaluation findings, reflected in the moderate number of participants and limited feedback. Options for further engagement with program participants were also discussed but seemed unrealistic, considering that activists' engagement tended to be more localized towards their immediate surroundings, and activists ultimately lacked time, resources, and interest for broader outreach.

Finally, the evaluation team discussed the feasibility of the dissemination of findings among program participants and the potential use of findings for further action. It was difficult to determine what findings were relevant for program participants considering that evaluation questions focused strongly on program internal processes and considering that interviewed

girls seemed most interested in receiving additional goods and services (additional training, school material, meeting hall, etc.). As adolescent girls had also reported they consulted their peers (in particular ever-married girls) as valuable sources of information on child marriage, the evaluation team decided to disseminate experiences with child marriage that girls had shared through their life histories in the form of animated videos. By doing so, the evaluation team identified relevant information and tailored it in a child-friendly way to feed back to adolescent girls. This not only amplified adolescent girls' voices and promoted peer-to-peer learning but also fulfilled the evaluator's obligation to share evaluation findings with adolescent girls in a meaningful and ethical way. Videos are meant to be disseminated within the program, with adolescent girls as their primary target audience.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Prescribing to the conventional understanding of evaluations, one can quickly dismiss human rights principles of participation, accountability, and inclusion as idealist standards that create unnecessarily complex evaluations that either fail to live up to standards of causal inference or hit up against the real-life constraints of pragmatic practice. However, some collaborative and action-based research approaches, such as the Participatory Impact Assessment and Learning Approach (PIALA), and Systemic Action Research (SAR) have emerged that successfully tackle the problem of impact attribution by challenging conventional concepts of validity and reliability [4] [5] [14]. Still, those approaches require the buy-in of evaluation commissioners towards reframing academic rigor and their commitment to providing necessary additional funding.

In the absence of evaluation commissioners' commitment to iterative, participant-led research, the ECM Flagship evaluation provides a promising practice that combines conventional evaluation methods with different participatory research approaches. By doing so, the formative evaluation successfully walks the line between academic qualitative rigor, ethics, and feasibility. The evaluation's 'mix and match' approach towards participatory research supports Aston and Apgar's [12] conclusions that intentionally combining components of relevant methods can make evaluations more complexity-aware and ultimately more effective. Experience from the ECM Flagship evaluation also suggests that participation should neither be an all-or-nothing approach and goal in itself nor that conventional consultative research approaches should, by default, be dismissed as pseudo-participatory. This experience mirrors guidance and opinions that evaluators should not cling to idealist concepts of participation but rather make thoughtful choices in their evaluation design [4] [8].

At the same time, the ECM Flagship evaluation confirms that careful conceptualization and planning of participatory research are crucial to avoid inefficiency and pseudo-participation [8] [13]. Learnings showed that - apart from the commitment and financial support of evaluation commissioners - participants' capacities and interests play a major role in determining their meaningful participation. The evaluation team also experienced that donors' and participants' interests do not always align. Accordingly, the evaluation found it most challenging to involve program participants in the highly conceptual planning and analysis phase. For the dissemination, it became obvious that the interests of participants and donors did not match. Still, the evaluation found creative ways to consider downward accountability towards program participants alongside conventional dissemination approaches, which ensured upward accountability.

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Observations during data collection provided indications of the added value of participatory research, which, even in its 'lowest' form – consultation – may have the potential to empower program participants. Experience when conducting life histories also uncovered the influence of existing power dynamics on participatory research and the importance of testing whether specific research methods are sensitive towards the socio-cultural context and established hierarchies [8] [13].

Overall, the ECM Flagship Evaluation can be considered a step in the right direction, opening up to participatory design while still maintaining conventional standards for qualitative program evaluations. Still, it should be stressed that the scope of participation was determined by the evaluation's funding and framework, which had decision-makers opt for a one-time evaluation conducted by external consultants. The approach certainly does not fully respond to movements and calls to localize M&E [1]. It stands for a tentative handshake with rather than a full embrace of the participatory evaluation process. To further unlock the potential of participatory research in program evaluations, it is crucial that program donors and evaluation commissioners not only rethink what constitutes rigorous data collection and analysis [2] but also be comfortable with giving up control and not knowing everything before they start [14].

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