

Breaking Down and Building Up Participation: A Comparative Study of Fifteen Participatory Evaluations in Nine Countries

Executive Summary

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Introduction

The report was completed by the non-profit, peace-building organisation, Generations For Peace (GFP). Based in Jordan, the organisation works to transform conflict at the grassroots level in communities across Africa, Asia and Europe. It is a volunteer-led organisation that empowers local people to bring about positive change at a community level. The organisation runs programmes using the peace-building vehicles of sport, art, advocacy, dialogue, and empowerment. GFP programmes are designed, implemented, and evaluated by volunteers with assistance being provided by headquarters (HQ) in Amman, the Jordanian capital.

The report provides findings based on 15 Participatory Evaluations (PEs) which took place in nine countries: Georgia, Ghana, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Nepal, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe.¹ The data was collected through several field visits during 2014 and is based on staff Observation Checklists (OC), recorded down at the time, and feedback from the volunteers, in the form of After Action Reviews (AAR).² That year, GFP worked to introduce Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) across all its programmes. However, the report focuses solely on the PE component of the GFP process to provide a comparative assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, and challenges it faces in diverse contexts.

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first time that a comparative study of a Non-Governmental Organisation's (NGO) PE process has been carried out on this scale – both in terms of the number and geographical scope. The report speaks to both an internal and external audience through providing findings that can be utilised in diverse third-sector settings. While the theory behind the participatory method is well developed, too little is understood of its implementation in a field setting. The report seeks to rectify that situation by providing a thorough examination of PE in practice.

The GFP Model

The GFP PE model is divided into three stages planning, the PE day and the write up and sharing. The planning stage takes place in the two weeks before the PE and involves organising logistics and the attendance of the key groups involved: the volunteers, programme participants, members of the wider community, and other stakeholders. On the PE day itself, **Focus Groups** are done with each group involved to find out what happened on the programme and why. Then a **Large Group Discussion** is held with everyone in attendance to discuss the findings of the Focus Groups. This is followed by the **Write Up and Sharing** in which the volunteers type up the findings of the PE into a specially designed grid, share it with GFP HQ and utilise it to guide the design of their next programme cycle.

¹ A total of 22 PEs were carried out in 11 countries in 2014, but only 15 PEs from 9 countries are used in the dataset for the report. Evidence from the remaining PEs held in Nigeria and Jordan did not correspond to the research framework set out in the report.

² For more on the After Action Review please see, Salem-Schatz, Susanne, Diana Ordin, and Brian Mittman. "Guide to the After Action Review," October 2010. http://www.cebma.org/wp-content/uploads/Guide-to-the-after_action_review.pdf

The Argument

For the PM&E field: The central argument of the report is that in order for participatory processes to improve the term participation needs to be critically engaged with. The literature clearly illustrates that there is lack of agreement on what the concept means. Rather than providing another definition, the report proposes the use of a checklist to assess PEs. It argues that breaking down the concept into different components will enhance a shared understanding and increase the field's ability to judge and compare. A checklist also removes zero-sum thinking; it works against the idea that a process either is, or is not participatory. Participation is beneficial for many reasons, but not all participatory processes have to be the same. It should be judged on a case-by-case basis, yet still be comparable – a checklist allows for exactly that.

For the GFP Process: To try out the checklist the report uses the GFP model. It finds that it achieves a great deal in terms of increasing involvement and community engagement, as well as producing simple, actionable results based on diverse perspectives, and enhancing the capacity of volunteers. Yet, however participatory the process is on paper, it encounters many hurdles in the field, which are detailed below. Collectively, these challenges reduce the process's accessibility for volunteers. A PE process is always going to be challenging; however, steps can be taken to increase its likelihood of success and increase a process's accessibility. The researchers argue that many of the challenges faced by the GFP model arise from the fact that volunteers were not involved in the design of the PE process. While the principles behind the GFP model are wholeheartedly participatory, the design of the process itself was not. In the future, volunteer consultation needs to be incorporated into the process itself. Whilst GFP established a feedback mechanism alongside the PE, which ensures that the process will be reworked regularly in accordance with volunteer feedback, the first iteration of the PE process did not include volunteer input.

The Checklist: The checklist tool is an amalgamation of what has previously been said on PE alongside what was said by GFP's volunteers and staff. Unlike previous ways of breaking down participation, this tool is interactive, providing a practical means of analysis that can be adapted to suit the specific PE model under review, which makes the tool completely unprecedented in the PM&E field. It allows participation to be assessed in a systematic way so that the different models used by the developmental field are comparable. It aims to have people working from the same page, however diverse their goals may be.

Question	Description	Organisation-Specific Findings	Action Points
Motivations and Objectives			
What motivations led to the decision to use participatory forms of M&E? (Q1)	The authors being choosing participatory methods spent heavily on the overall aim of the programme intervention and not the overall main engagement, but some of the main reasons and objectives are listed below as guiding examples. Users should add more points to check off based on the specific approach they are evaluating.		
The PE brings practical benefits/reduced workload.	✓	For all organisations with relatively small HQ operations, but with a very large volunteer base, PE was chosen as it reduces staff workloads and hands control over to the volunteers.	When needed for the workload for staff will be reduced, so it needs to be ensured that volunteers are kept up with the process.
Preference: PE is preferable as it hands over evaluative control to the community.	✓	Preferential with terms mandating of volunteer-led, community-based peer-building programmes as it hands evaluative control over to the community.	When possible, future PEs should be included in accordance with community feedback so that community contributes to the design of the process.
Evaluative capacity: PE is beneficial as its inclusiveness allows the process to produce more knowledge.	✓	PE was chosen as it provides a chance for a diverse array of actors in the community to speak about the programme. Collectively, their opinions provide a wealth of detail.	When there is representative attendance to make sure that the advantage is achieved.
What are the objectives of the process? (Q2)	Improved organisational learning.	✓	When the GFP is able to collect more information from a more diverse array of people which helps to inform programming to local contexts.
To make programming more responsive to local needs.	✓	Through hearing from such an array of people the process is able to discover what their interests and needs are.	GFP should always refer to the findings prior to the next cycle of programming to ensure that the organisation makes use of the information gathered.
Building the capacity of those who participate.	✓	Through the opportunity to increase its volunteer's skills and allow them to be major beneficiaries of the process.	GFP should always refer to the findings prior to the next cycle of programming to ensure that the organisation makes use of the information gathered.
The Process			
What decisions did the process? (Q3)	The process is aimed at benefiting those in use who		

1. The Participatory Checklist

In terms of when the checklist should be used, it can serve as a reference when designing a PE or be used after a PE has taken place to assess effectiveness. In the report, it is used for the latter purpose. When

designing a model, the checklist can serve as a list of areas, to consider what should be included and what should not, based on the motivations and aims of the model being created; when assessing an already implemented process, the tool can be moulded to create a list of points on which to judge a process against its original aims.

The tool is divided into the following areas: motivations and aims, the process, inclusion and representativeness, social negotiation, power, empowerment/benefits, and the results.

The Findings

The findings demonstrate some strong areas of consensus between staff and volunteers on the processes, which provide a strong mandate for change and improvement. In addition, both groups from which the data was drawn provided insights about participatory processes that were entirely missing from the literature. A summary of the findings, with the relevant percentages, is provided below.

Strengths of the process: According to 100 per cent of the volunteers participating in AARs, and 63 per cent of GFP staff who completed OCs, the most common theme on strengths was that everyone who is involved with the programme is consulted which provides insights on diverse perspectives. Linked to this, the next most common advantage cited was that the process reveals the tangible results of the programme (volunteers 100 per cent; staff responses 58 per cent). Other major areas include the benefits it affords to those who enact it (capacity building), the invisible information it captures (unexpected changes), and how it allows those involved to plan for future programming. What really sets responses apart, however, is their focus on themes absent from the literature. These include raising awareness of the programme and the communities understanding of what it was about (volunteers 80 per cent; staff responses 21 per cent), that the process increases GFP's credibility and legitimacy in the communities where it operates by involving a diverse array of actors (volunteers 53 per cent; staff responses 42 per cent), and that it allows for a celebration of achievements (volunteers 53 per cent; staff responses 43 per cent). These findings represent additional strengths of PEs that can be added to the understanding of participatory processes.

Weaknesses/challenges: Volunteers and staff also noted several weaknesses. Again, there were some strong areas of consensus among the two respondent groups. The joint most common weakness cited, was attendance – and specifically, having representative numbers attend the PEs (58 per cent of staff responses; 53 per cent volunteers). Thematically, the largest set of weaknesses, or challenges concerned the burdens the process placed on volunteers. This included the process being too time consuming (the joint most common response, 58 per cent of staff responses; volunteers 53 per cent), challenging planning/logistics/coordination (volunteers 67 per cent; 11 per cent of staff responses), the level of support it requires from HQ (staff responses 58 per cent) and the amount of human resources it needs (volunteers

27 per cent; staff responses 21 per cent). Other issues that arose concerned the specifics of the process, which are discussed in detail below, the timings, and the challenge of gathering honest information from participants.

After looking at the strengths and weaknesses a picture emerges of a process that is able to raise the organisation's profile, strengthen community ties, develop volunteers' capacity and produce immediately visible information that is useful for future programming. Yet, the weaknesses illustrate that in order to achieve these goals, the process places an enormous burden on the volunteers. Moreover, poor attendance is a frequent problem that undermines the value of the process.

The Specifics of the model: The findings here were sourced exclusively from the OCs.

Planning: These findings show that the ways used to inform volunteers about the PE process, prior to staff arrival in the field, were not entirely effective. Despite having received the relevant materials at least a month in advance of the PE, in 11 out of 15 PEs volunteers seemed 'unfamiliar' or only 'somewhat familiar' with the process. Yet, according to the responses provided in the OCs, once staff arrived into the field providing a verbal explanation of the PE process, tasks were delegated effectively (at 9 out of 15 PEs) and logistical arrangements were in place (at 7 out of 15 PEs, and somewhat ready at 5 PEs, meaning that most but not all elements were in place). Overall, the planning of the PEs appears to have been generally successful but only after a verbal introduction was provided. Thus, the PE process does not appear to be too difficult to organise; however, to ensure its accessibility steps beyond the sharing of relevant materials must be taken.

The PE day: This section focuses on attendance, the Focus Groups, and the Large Group Discussion. Attendance and representativeness is vital for the success of a PE; yet, the findings reveal that achieving this is one of the most challenging elements of the process. For attendance, although it was 'as expected' or greater in 10 out of 15 PEs, all groups were represented in only seven out of fifteen PEs. In four cases one group was entirely missing, and in four cases groups were underrepresented. Ensuring representative attendance appears to be a major challenge in the PE process, yet without it the PE cannot be an equal consultation. In many cases the Focus Groups and Large Group Discussion did not go as planned. For the Focus Groups, observations reveal that while they were largely successful in extracting information from those who participated in them (at all fifteen PEs they were either 'successful' or 'somewhat successful'), two issues harmed them: mixed facilitation skills among those leading the focus groups, and difficulties in understanding the questions (at almost half of the PEs questions were not understood). However, it is the Large Group Discussion that faces the most problems. The findings revealed that it almost

always followed procedure (at 14 out of 15 PEs), but that in the majority of cases it did not result in a fruitful discussion that allowed for social negotiation.

Write up and sharing: For the final component of the PE model staff found that in all PEs the purpose of this component was either fully or partially understood by volunteers. In terms of the effectiveness of the write up and sharing, staff found all PEs facilitated a discussion of the findings: with 12 PEs being categorised as ‘yes’ and three PEs as ‘somewhat’.³ The findings show that the Write Up and Sharing was often the most successful part of the process. It provides an effective means of consolidating information, facilitating discussion, and disseminating it to relevant parties.

Analysis of the data in this entire subsection shows that the GFP PE model achieves a great deal in terms of bringing groups together, granting them a voice, and building capacity; however, each of the fifteen case studies examined in the report reveal difficulties. Chief among these are problems with attendance, and challenges with carrying out Focus Groups and the Large Group Discussion.

Improvements: In terms of what changes were needed, the questions, asked at the Focus Groups and the Large Group Discussion, dominated the answers of both respondent groups: including the need to make the questions resonate better with the groups participating in the PE (volunteers 80 per cent; staff responses 32 per cent), make them less complex in their language and requirements (volunteers 53 per cent; staff 43 per cent), and separate the questions into several sets so that they respond to the experience of each Focus Group. Among staff, the most common response (53 per cent) was that the Large Group Discussion is ineffectual, it did not render the quality or scale of discussion desired. Among volunteers the second most common response (73 per cent) was that stakeholders should be informed about the programme throughout its duration to ensure better attendance. Other themes that arose, were the need to increase incentives to participate, the need to provide a more diverse set of tools to equip the volunteers with knowledge on the PE, and to address power structures preventing people from speaking openly during the PE.

The findings agree with those of the section above, which examined the process. They relate mostly to three key areas: the questions (asked at the Focus Groups), the Large Group Discussion, and increasing attendance through engagement and incentives. All of these points have recurred again and again, throughout the analysis. Collectively, they provide a clear agenda for change so that the GFP PE process can adapt, improve, and get closer to achieving its stated aims.

³ They ranked in former if a detailed discussion took place and in the latter if the discussion took place but it was not comprehensive.

The final checklist and recommendations: In addition to the themes covered above, based on the experiences and opinions of staff and volunteers three additional categories were added to the checklist tool: advocacy, awareness raising and community engagement; celebration and rewards; and, social control and inequalities. In the report, the GFP process was assessed against each point on the checklist to provide a verdict. Based on this verdict, action points were developed in the adjacent column which were then turned into recommendations, a selection of which are presented below. Through analysing the GFP model, the report demonstrates to readers how the tool can be used and how it can be moulded to examine diverse participatory processes.

Recommendations - For Participatory Processes

- **Theoretical clarity over the concept of participation:** In order to increase accountability, learning and improvement the report proposes the use of a **checklist** for organisations working in the international development/peace-building field to assess their PE processes.
- **Increase the accessibility of participatory processes:** In order to ensure this, PEs need to be made more accessible and attuned to local needs. This can be achieved through:
 - **Giving people a stake in the process' design**, including the questions asked, so that the process resonates with them;
 - **Investing more in the capacity development of volunteers** to ensure that they have the correct skills;
 - **Diversifying the mediums used to inform and mentor people about the principles/purpose of PE** to ensure a clear understanding and ideological buy-in.
- **Ensure Representative Attendance:** In order to ensure representative attendance a PE needs to be more grounded in the community and provide rewards for those who participate in it. This can be achieved through:
 - **Involving potential attendees from the beginning** to keep them engaged, informed and increase the likelihood they will attend the PE;
 - **Using local contacts and networks to advertise/promote the PE;**
 - **Providing more incentives for people to attend** through material or experiential rewards and making the process more celebratory.

Recommendations - For the GFP Model

- **Make the process more flexible by incorporating volunteer consultation into the process:** There needs to be a routinised way of consulting volunteers at end of every PE. This will provide the volunteers with an increased sense of ownership over the PE process.

- **The questions:** The effects of insufficient volunteer consultation were felt most acutely with the question set, which can be improved by:
 - **Avoiding complex terminology** to maximise understanding;
 - **Having different questions for different focus groups** to ensure relevance;
 - **Letting the volunteers design the questions** to ensure relevance and resonance.

- **Large Group Discussion:** Can be improved by **reducing the number of questions asked** to allow more space for discussion.

Conclusion

The argument of the report has been twofold: one concerning the PM&E field and the other concerning the GFP PE model. Regarding the PM&E field, the checklist was formed in response to the need for greater critical engagement with the concept of participation. To encourage organisations to be more aware of the participatory nature of their processes, the checklist serves as a tool to examine their own PM&E procedures. The use of the GFP PE model as a case study for the checklist, showcases the usability of the checklist.

With regard to the second argument, that of evaluating the GFP PE model, the checklist revealed that while the model achieves a great deal it also encounters many challenges in the field. The challenge most identified by staff and volunteers, was that of inaccessibility. The principles behind its different components, such as the Focus Groups and Large Group Discussion, are wholeheartedly participatory. What is missing is a sense of ownership among the volunteers – a feeling that they helped design this process to evaluate their programme. In participatory terms, the GFP model has climbed the stairs but missed the first step

To summarise, this report demonstrates the need for PM&E procedures to be more reactive to what happens in the field. The theoretical justifications for participation are highly convincing, but agreeing with them alone will not make individuals or organisations able to implement such processes. As a field, PM&E needs to clarify what it meant by participation so that it is able to grow and improve; as an organisation GFP needs to expand the participatory credentials of its PE process by tapping into the wealth of knowledge produced by its volunteers. In both these pursuits the report represents a positive step.