What is the policy brief about?
This policy brief shows the possible uses of participatory methods throughout all stages of the project life cycle for peacebuilding and conflict transformation practitioners. This includes conflict analysis, project planning and implementation, participatory action research and monitoring, evaluation and learning. It also provides specific recommendations for practitioners wanting to implement participatory approaches and outlines the possibilities and limitations of these approaches. Finally, it includes a collection of resources for different participatory methods and their application in peacebuilding contexts.

Why is the topic relevant?
The main aim of participatory approaches in peacebuilding work is to include the people affected by the project in its design, implementation and evaluation. This is one of the most effective ways to foster support and buy-in of conflict-affected populations, which are key to the long-term success and sustainable impact of any peacebuilding intervention. Participatory methods also offer the opportunity to include marginalised voices, contributing to more inclusive peacebuilding.

For whom is it important?
This policy brief is primarily addressed to the international peacebuilding and conflict transformation community. It will be most relevant for practitioners and implementing organisations but also for donors, policymakers and international civil society organisations. It is also of interest to practitioners interested in inclusive and bottom-up peacebuilding and decolonising the field.

Key recommendations
Peacebuilding practitioners interested in implementing participatory approaches should
- Tailor the approach to each context and group of practitioners.
- Be conscious of power dynamics and hierarchies when selecting participants and throughout the process.
- Budget for participatory approaches from the beginning, including extra time and participant remuneration.
- Be flexible and ready to adjust activities and approaches as the project is ongoing.
- Be willing to adjust own and the funder’s expectations as well as outcomes to protect the integrity of the process.
- Manage expectations of participants about limits to possible outcomes of the project.
- Guard the safety of participants.
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About the author: Dr Evelyn Pauls is a Researcher in the Conflict Transformation Research department at the Berghof Foundation and the Impact Manager of the Gender, Justice and Security Hub.

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Berghof Foundation
Berghof Foundation
Operations gGmbH
Lindenstraße 34
10969 Berlin
Germany
www.berghof-foundation.org
1 Introduction

Inspired by the slogan of “Nothing about us without us”, first used by disability activists in the 1990s and taken up by indigenous rights groups and others since, the core idea of participatory approaches in peacebuilding work is to include the project participants and beneficiaries in project design and implementation. Participatory methods in peacebuilding work can help to design projects that are actually wanted by the affected group; to implement them in a conflict-sensitive and context-appropriate manner and to create more sustainable impact.

The support and buy-in of conflict-affected populations are key to the long-term success of any peacebuilding intervention. Going beyond a needs-based approach or community consultations, participatory project design, implementation and evaluation builds on the active participation of conflict-affected populations in peacebuilding programmes. This could be through community mapping, creative methods such as photovoice or playback theatre, or participatory evaluation. Creative methods are often used as part of participatory project designs as they allow a more diverse group of people to convey their perspectives unrestricted by traditional formats. They also allow multiple realities to be recognised and valid at the same time as well as to embrace the complexity of (post-) conflict settings.

Development cooperation has been employing participatory methods since the 1970s, such as Rapid/Participatory Rural Appraisals (to learn quickly about a context) and Participatory Learning and Action, as an alternative to mainstream approaches to development. Development practitioners started using these methods to disrupt the often top-down, linear and one-size-fits-all practice of Global North ‘experts’ teaching Global South ‘poor people’ how to develop properly. Peacebuilding and development organisations increasingly also consider participatory methods as one of the responses to the desire for a stronger emphasis on diversity and inclusion in their work in (post-) conflict contexts as well as for their interventions to have a bigger and more sustainable impact.

One key aspect to consider is who the relevant (groups of) actors are that will contribute to such a participatory process. It is often unfeasible to work with every relevant actor – which might be different conflict actors, e.g. combatants, victims, high-level officials, etc.; each group again includes people of different genders, socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds, ethnic groups, age groups etc. There are several options for how to select participants: One is to include a wide variety of actors to be as representative as possible. This makes it possible for all voices to be heard in the process and might create larger buy-in from the entire community in the end. However, it might also recreate existing power dynamics, whereby marginalised actors might not be able to speak up. A second option is to focus explicitly on marginalised voices as those whose perspectives are not usually included in consultations on project design and implementation. While this will not lead to a balance of views within the project, in the overall peacebuilding landscape, this could be an important counterpoint to more mainstream perspectives.

This policy brief goes through the possible uses of participatory methods throughout all stages of the project life cycle for peacebuilding and conflict transformation practitioners: (1) conflict analysis; (2) project planning and implementation; (3) research and (4) evaluation. It also outlines the limitations and possibilities of using such approaches and gives recommendations to take into account when implementing participatory elements into project work. Finally, it lists specific participatory methods and additional resources to delve deeper into the topic.
2 Conflict analysis

All peacebuilding projects start with an analysis of the conflict context, in which the project will be implemented. Conflict analysis before a peacebuilding or conflict transformation project is hard to imagine without considering local perspectives. Adopting a participatory approach at this early stage allows peacebuilders and development practitioners to see the conflict and the most pressing issues through the perspective of the people affected by it. Leading to more trust and transparency, the involvement of participants from the start will allow the project team and the participants to ensure that the project addresses the relevant issues and that it is not detrimental to the context.

How this is done will affect the choice of intervention and the planning and implementation of the project. Inviting a group of ‘locals’, most often capital-based, Western-educated analysts, to analyse a conflict will inevitably lead to different results than consulting a gender- and age-diverse group from different parts of the country. As Ware and Laoutides observe, ‘Elite knowledge is widely privileged in the analysis’. When participatory conflict analysis processes are conducted that do consult with a wider set of the population, their conflict experiences and narratives are only considered as data, as sources. The analysis of these experiences is largely left to either civil society elites or foreign specialists. Projects like the Everyday Peace Indicators are attempting to develop a participatory indicator system that captures how individuals and communities see peace and conflict in their everyday lives. However, there is still a lack of established participatory practice within many peacebuilding organisations that includes non-elite conflict experiences in conflict analysis.

**Participatory conflict analysis: Creative and participatory conflict mapping in Yemen**

As part of the Berghof Foundation and PDF-Yemen’s multitrack approach supporting the peace process in Yemen, the team hosts an annual team workshop, in which the Berlin-based and the Yemen-based teams jointly analyse the current conflict situation and reflect on the ongoing activities of the projects. These annual workshops are essential for the team members to meet in person, especially the Yemen-based members who cannot meet in person inside Yemen.

In 2019, the team conducted a conflict analysis using creative participatory methods, with a focus on mapping the relations and power dynamics between conflict actors in different parts of Yemen and the region. Using wooden blocks, rope and paper, the team, created a 3D visual representation of the relationships between different conflict actors. This method worked particularly well as many of the participants were not familiar with conflict analysis as a method and this provided a space to experiment with different tactile experiences to find a good representation of their perception of the current state of the conflict. It also created the opportunity to present different aspects of the conflict dynamics to the other members of the team in an intuitive way. The team emphasised the importance of (1) adjusting the approach in the room if one activity does not resonate as intended; (2) creating a safe space where participants can express their perspectives without the pressure of having to decide on immediate implications for the projects; (3) having a knowledgeable facilitator who understands the power dynamics among the participants and (4) not overburdening the process by trying to capture too many dimensions of the conflict.
3 Project planning and implementation

Most peacebuilding projects are implemented with partners in the relevant countries, to build on the expertise of partners and have a continued presence in the context. In some cases, project partners also contribute to the design and planning of projects. There is a wide spectrum of how participatory these processes can be, from having the opportunity to comment on finished project designs, to equitable partnership and collaboration to largely partner-led with minimum input from the peacebuilding organisation.

Especially in long-term engagements in a particular context, either with a longer project or several project cycles, participants often raise the need for particular follow-up activities. Incorporating these ideas often happens in an ad-hoc manner rather than with an explicitly participatory design. But if those feedback loops and moments of reflection are incorporated into the project design from the start, they can be adequately resourced and include all relevant voices. Determining together with stakeholders what they want a project to do will help actually achieve these objectives, as participants will have ownership over the project. Moreover, the involvement of participants will also help ensure that the project does no harm.

Apart from the strategic direction of the project and the content covered, adopting a participatory approach also extends to the practical aspects of implementation e.g. the logistics of where, when and how an activity should take place. This includes agreeing on the dates and times of the activity, considering for example the agricultural calendar, caring responsibilities, curfews or holiday seasons; the selection of a safe and accessible venue for all participants; and the atmosphere and facilitation of it, e.g. in the participant’s own language(s) and culturally appropriate settings. Finally, the structure of the peacebuilding (and development) field makes participatory budget planning and oversight very difficult. The inherent material imbalance between Global North development and peacebuilding donors and organisations and largely Global South peacebuilding implementing partners is unlikely to be radically altered by participatory project design and implementation, although they might offer a format and language to discuss this more openly.

Religion and peace education

In 2018, the peace education department of the Berghof Foundation hosted an international workshop on “Religion and Peace Education” with high-ranking representatives of different religious communities and organisations. The participants of this workshop realised that the contribution of religions to peace can be fostered through synergies between peace education and religion, with religious actors playing a central role. However, they identified a lack of accessible peace education learning formats and materials. This clearly expressed need laid the groundwork for a follow-up project, focused on jointly developing materials and spaces to contribute to the sharpening of peace education in religious contexts.

Starting from this, a smaller group of members of the three monotheistic world religions with experience in pedagogical approaches participated in a multi-stage process to develop, refine and pilot a manual of different approaches on the synergies of peace education and religion. The key question was how to design a context- and target group-specific manual, which is at the same time useful in many different contexts. Conflict- and trauma-sensitivity was another key consideration as the manual is also used in crisis and conflict contexts.

Once a draft of the manual was developed and disseminated through web-based peace education formats, the partners tested it in their different work contexts. Several feedback loops were scheduled into the timeline of the project from the beginning, ensuring that lessons learned during the development and pilot phase were included in later versions of the manual, which is now freely accessible online. This participatory development process in itself was already part of the capacity-building part of the project and continued to build trust between the future multipliers of the materials and the project staff.
4 Participatory (action) research

In peace and conflict studies, participatory (action) research has become one tool of more equitable knowledge production in collaboration with the communities that are being studied – with the aim to produce research results that are of use to those communities.

Working with insider researchers, people who are part of the affected community, is one way to conduct participatory research. This can be combined with involving a larger part of the community at all stages of the research process. Also here, paying attention to local power dynamics is essential and recruitment criteria for insider researchers, such as a certain level of education or research experience, will privilege people from a certain background for those positions. This in turn will affect the questions they ask, the data they gather and how they will analyse it.

Several stages of the research process can include participatory elements. Firstly, the research topic or question itself can be initiated by members of the affected community, e.g. members of peaceful protest movements wanting to know which strategies are most likely to succeed to include their demands in peace negotiations. In case there is already a predetermined topic for the project, e.g. peaceful protest movements and peace negotiations, a participatory approach can still help to narrow down the scope of the research and settle on a topic that will be most likely taken up by the relevant actors as it addresses their needs and interests directly. Second, the research design can be decided on collaboratively, based on the research question and the skills of the insider researcher. Of course, skills training for insider researchers in research methods, such as interviewing or participant observation, is a key part of many participatory research projects.

Thirdly, and this is where participatory methods are most commonly used, the data collection can be done by affected communities, e.g. through peer-to-peer interviews, through creative methods like photovoice, participatory filmmaking or body mapping (see more details on different methods at the end of this brief). Fourthly, the gathered data needs to be analysed and here the input of insider researchers or communities more broadly is particularly important although often missing from participatory research designs. Without the local knowledge in interpreting the data, a lot can be missed, e.g. tacit or implicit knowledge necessary to understand quotes, identifying what is left unsaid, and knowledge about what can and cannot be said in certain settings. Finally, the dissemination of the research findings is more likely to reach the right audiences or research users when affected communities are actively deciding who to communicate with and how.

**Participatory Action Research: Peer-to-peer filmmaking with female ex-combatants**

The Conflict Transformation Research team at the Berghof Foundation has used participatory documentary filmmaking as a method to research long-term reintegration challenges of female ex-combatants as well as memorialise their conflict experiences. In three consecutive projects, female ex-combatants in Aceh, Burundi, Colombia, Mindanao, Nepal and Uganda were trained in filmmaking and research skills before conducting peer-to-peer video interviews within their female ex-combatants communities. The project was initiated by a female ex-combatant organisation in Nepal, the research questions – different in every context – were designed through collaborative workshops, and the visual language and settings of the filming were chosen by the interviewees together with the insider researchers. The editing of the final product was done centrally although the selection of the material to include was repeatedly discussed with the insider researchers.

The video material is used for training members of non-state armed movements currently preparing for or engaged in peace processes; for intergenerational dialogues by conflict-affected groups; for awareness raising and advocacy internationally; and for research and teaching.
5 Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) is probably the part of the project life cycle that features the least participatory elements. Although M&E requirements by donors are ever-increasing, project and impact evaluation is still often an afterthought in many peacebuilding projects. There is rarely enough time and funding remaining to plan for a time-intensive participatory process at this stage. There are many well-documented reasons for this, including short project cycles with limited funding and no staff retention beyond the official end of the project, the complexity and non-linearity of conflicts and the intangibility and difficulty of measuring peacebuilding impacts such as mindset changes, perceived security or reconciliation.

However, if we want to know whether our programmes and interventions had any effects, we need to evaluate them. Apart from donor requirements, we should ask ourselves: who are we evaluating for? The design of the evaluation depends on whether it is for example for the project team, internally for the organisation, the project participants or the wider community. If we are interested in impact evaluation, meaning the wider societal effects of the peacebuilding intervention, we should consider finding out directly from the people who are supposed to be benefitting from it.

Most M&E components of peacebuilding projects include capturing the feedback of participants, e.g. in training or workshops, through surveys or focus group discussions. By participatory MEL, we mean something more far-reaching than this. If the project has been designed in a participatory way, we should already know what the affected community would see as a positive impact of the project.

Even if we don’t know yet, participatory M&E should start with the question of what would a positive impact of the project look like for the people affected by it. Once this goal is clear, the second step is to gather data to assess whether this change has taken place – or whether there is first evidence that it might be taking place. Similar to the steps outlined above regarding participatory research, M&E can be thought of as a mini-research project in itself. Thus, involving the people affected by the project in the data collection about its impact, is important. Note here that this involvement should go deeper than e.g. hiring local enumerators – instead the methods for data collection should be designed collaboratively. Going beyond standard formats of quantitative data collection might be useful here to gain a more comprehensive picture of how and what change is taking place. One increasingly popular method for participatory MEL in complex peacebuilding projects is the Most Significant Change (MSC) Method, which involves generating and analysing personal accounts of change and deciding which of these is most significant – and why. Finally, the analysis of the collected data needs to happen jointly to enable meaningful interpretation of the gathered material, for example, the explanation of the context and subtle meanings as part of a storytelling methodology, or particular symbols in creative methods.

External example: Participatory evaluation of peacebuilding project in communities after post-election violence in Kenya

To evaluate a ‘sports for peace’ programme implemented by Mercy Corps in the Rift Valley after the post-election violence in 2007, the NGO decided to use the innovative method of PV & MSC (Participatory Video and Most Significant Change). Youth who had taken part in the sports component of the programme before were recruited as video coaches. They received training on video skills and the process of the MSC method. After collectively agreeing on the three most important issue areas for the evaluation, they gathered stories of the other programme participants. After having collected a large number of stories, the next step is listening to all of them and collectively discussing and deciding which stories would be the most representative to showcase different areas of impact – called ‘domains of change’. The selected stories were then scripted, in some cases acted out and filmed. As the final step of the process, the produced videos were screened in the communities and subsequent discussions with this wider audience took place, facilitated by the video coaches.
One unintended consequence of this participatory process was that it itself became a tool for peacebuilding and conflict transformation for youth from (formerly) warring tribes in the Uasin Gishu district in the Rift Valley in Kenya. Through engaging in the process, individual and group relations were transformed through the re-establishment of communication as an inter-group dialogue. The participatory evaluation served as a catalyst to open up dialogue within the community. The videos had become instruments for sharing experiences and a space for video coaches and viewers to reflect upon the stories and relate them to their own situations.

6 Possibilities & opportunities

This brief has shown that there are many different ways to use participatory methods in different types of peacebuilding projects and at different points throughout the project cycle. Using participatory methods offers these possibilities and opportunities:

- **Increased legitimacy.** Top-down implementation of peacebuilding interventions by external actors is unlikely to gain the trust and buy-in of affected populations. Trust and confidence in the process and the people facilitating it are crucial for continued commitment to an often lengthy and demanding process. This is especially relevant when working with hard-to-reach and marginalised groups in conflict contexts.¹

- **Stronger relationships.** Through engaging in a participatory process together, the relationships between organisations and partners usually become much stronger than in a traditional project set-up. Not only does this create an atmosphere of trust, where problems are more likely to be openly addressed, but it also leads to a greater adaptation capacity if changes are necessary.

- **Inclusion of marginalised voices.** One of the main opportunities that participatory work offers is the inclusion of marginalised voices in project planning, implementation and evaluation. This is not inherently part of participatory work – these methods can equally be applied e.g. with government ministers or local power holders. However, it is a particularly powerful method to amplify the voices of marginalised groups who do not usually feed into designing or implementing research and peacebuilding projects.

- **The process itself can be transformative.** Both for researchers/project managers and participants, a well-designed participatory process can be a transformative experience in itself, permanently changing the perspective of the people who have been through it and their approach to peacebuilding. Facilitating a participatory process means taking a back seat as a researcher/project manager and letting the participants guide the work. For participants, being active agents, being listened to and heard and taking decisions about how a project is run can be an empowering experience in itself. Almost as a side effect, participatory work also builds capacities in the conflict-affected context. In order to co-facilitate workshops, have insider researchers or conduct community-run evaluations, people often have to be trained to fulfil those roles.

- **Contribute to decolonising peacebuilding.** In recent years, there has been an increasing push to decolonise e.g. academia, development and humanitarian aid agendas and also peacebuilding. With most peacebuilding organisations still funded by, staffed with, based in and working with concepts from the Global North, this is a long overdue conversation especially as the field repositions itself in light of rising defence expenditure and militarism. ‘Expanding local ownership’ is listed as the first strategy to decolonise peacebuilding in the 2022

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Participatory Methods in Peacebuilding Work

paper by Lisa Schirch² who calls for the involvement of diverse community-based organisations to be involved in 'devising conflict analysis processes, programme development, implementation, oversight and evaluation'. Attention should be paid that the radical potential of the 'decolonising turn' is not slowly watered down into yet another tick-boxing exercise.

- **More sustainable impact.** Projects that are co-designed by and implemented with the people that are directly affected by them are more likely to have a sustainable impact beyond the life of the project. They are more likely to lead to permanent mindset and behavioural change since the theories of change, on which they rely, have been developed by the people that have to implement them in their daily lives.

### 7 Limitations

- **Participatory work is resource intensive, especially on time.** Planning for and implementing participatory methods takes a lot more time than ‘regular’ activities. Identifying relevant actors, consulting with them, co-designing interventions and allowing for feedback loops will take longer than many organisations have, especially in the project proposal stage. These additional activities and loops have cost implications. It is worth considering, however, how the additional costs of a participatory process relate to the long-term benefits in sustainable impact that a participatory process might have.

- **Required flexibility and possibility for adjustment.** When working in participatory ways, there has to be room to adjust planning, implementation and dissemination based on the process. In an open and trusted environment, project participants might also voice more concerns and critiques of the approach or the overall project. If outputs, objectives, plans and donor expectations are very strictly defined, employing participatory methods might not be the best way forward. This equally applies to the mindset of the researcher/project manager – if there are very clear ideas about the expected results of the process, this is unlikely to work.

- **Participatory methods do not solve power imbalances.** Using a participatory approach as outlined here will highlight economic and social inequalities, underlying almost any peacebuilding or conflict transformation intervention, and might start to address them but it is not a magical solution. Depending on how the process is designed and who is selected to participate, it might also reproduce existing power hierarchies for example between civil society representatives, who might be most likely to contribute to a participatory project and are often educated and based in urban centres, and the conflict-affected part of society in rural areas. In the worst case, engaging in a participatory process might create or bring to the forefront tensions that cannot be resolved within the scope of the project.

- **Potentially limited reach.** Aiming to include the relevant conflict-affected populations might limit the reach of the project. Time sensitivity and resource constraints are likely to necessitate limiting a participatory process to a manageable number of active participants, making any large-scale interventions unlikely.

- **Superficial or tokenistic participation might be worse than none at all.** Sometimes, projects claim to work in participatory ways but inputs or recommendations by conflict-affected participants are not heard or meaningfully incorporated into the project. After having raised expectations by involving people, the disappointment if the promises are not delivered through half-hearted implementation, might be greater than if it had not been done at all.

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8 Recommendations

- **Tailor the approach to each context.** Every process and every group of contributors is different. What works well in one context, might be unwelcomed in another. Any workshop, process or training, like the method itself, has to be adjusted based on the context and participants. Participatory methods are not a fixed set of tools but a diverse range of possible techniques, which need to be flexibly adapted to each context. Importantly, including as many participatory elements with as wide of a group of participants as possible is not always the best way forward. Especially when working with marginalised groups or women, there might be good reasons for focusing on the participation of those groups rather than widening it to the entire affected community.

- **Partial implementation is possible.** Participatory methods are not a take it or leave it proposition. As the examples above have shown, different parts of the project cycle can be designed to include participatory elements. A participatory evaluation can be run even if the project was designed without the participation of conflict-affected communities. Vice versa, the project can be designed collectively but there might only be the capacity to implement it with a small central team. There are of course trade-offs to consider with all of these choices, e.g. a participatory evaluation might evaluate the project with different objectives than it was originally designed for.

- **Protect the integrity of the process.** After a decision is made to use participatory methods for the project, there is often the (often unconscious) temptation to influence the process. Taking a back seat as the organiser or only contributing in a toned-down way can be challenging but is crucial to protect the integrity of the process.

- **Expectation management is key.** Even in well-run processes, participants might develop unrealistic expectations about what might be possible outcomes of the project. This has to be clearly addressed and well managed by the facilitators throughout the process so that expectations that cannot be met at the end of the project do not stand in the way of potential positive impacts.

- **Importance of facilitation and communication at eye level.** Throughout the implementation of any participatory process, the role of the facilitator(s) is key. Ideally, one or more of the participants can facilitate the process themselves. Both internal and external (co-) facilitators should be particularly aware of any existing power relations among participants and find appropriate ways to balance them to allow for equal participation of everyone.

- **Budget for participant remuneration.** While the costs of the logistical implementation of workshops, including transport, accommodation etc, are included in every project budget, compensation for the participation of affected communities in these processes is often overlooked. Taking time off from a regular schedule, missing work, organising childcare, covering for agricultural labour etc. has costs for participants and should be taken into account, especially when the process involves marginalised groups. This should also allow for continued commitment to the process by the participants.

- **Guard the safety of participants.** Employing participatory methods does not (necessarily) mean that all partners are equally responsible or that decision-making is fully egalitarian. In any context, but particularly in conflict-affected contexts, guarding the safety of participants is a priority. Contributing to a lengthy participatory process with an external actor, such as a Western peacebuilding organisation, might put people at risk. Participants might also not be comfortable participating freely, depending on the design of the process and who is in the room.
9 Resources and examples of participatory methods in peacebuilding

Body mapping


Community social mapping using creative methods


Decolonising design of peacebuilding interventions

Focus group discussions
‘Focus Group Discussions.’ Youth4peace. https://youth4peace.info/ProgressStudy/FocusGroupDiscussions

Gender-sensitive participatory conflict analysis

Participatory Polling

Participatory Video

Participatory Theatre


Photovoice


**Playback Theatre**


**Storytelling**


**Transect walks with a focus on sites of conflict, e.g. around farmland, access to natural resources**


**(Virtual) Consultations**