

Reimagining peacebuilding monitoring and evaluation

A call for decolonized and locally led solutions
— How digital technology can support change



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Cover page picture created by Microsoft Copilot: “Local peacebuilder using digital tools”

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1. Introduction

This report is part of the co-development project of Felm and Valoa. The project's focus is in defining, what kind of digital solutions could address the monitoring and evaluation needs of local peacebuilders.

As a red thread through this report runs a call for decolonization and shifting the power from the actors of Global North to those of Global South. Decolonization refers to a process, where several aid actors are acknowledging how the colonial structures and racism continue to exist in humanitarian aid, development and peacebuilding sectors, undermining the value and dignity of local partners and actors. In practice, this means recognising that international actors (e.g. international organizations, donors, INGOs, researchers from Global North) have been and continue to be involved in maintaining unequal power structures. Decolonization calls to fundamentally transform the systems, relationships, and assumptions that have long governed international aid. This requires a rebalancing of relationships—where local actors and communities are not merely recipients of aid or subjects of intervention, but leaders, decision-makers, and co-creators of solutions.

Also monitoring, evaluation and learning has reflected these inequalities of power. In terms of methods and tools, M&E and reporting still largely takes place on MS Word and Excel documents, resulting in often time-consuming and burdensome management of data and compiling reports by local organizations. Thus, another mission of in this project is to explore how digital solutions could be utilized so that they support monitoring, evaluation and learning of local peacebuilders. While there are some digital solutions available, their potential is still not fully applied in the peacebuilding field; neither are they designed based on the needs and participation of local peacebuilders and their communities.

This report first describes the methodology of the co-development project. Then, report gives an overview (1) how peacebuilding and mediation have evolved and (2) how M&E approaches and practices have developed in recent decades. In the second part of the report, some of the existing digital tools are assessed, before highlighting the key aspects of potential digital solutions to be developed. Throughout the report, we aim to highlight the views of local peacebuilders.

This project is based on the recognition of the need for ethical digital solutions that 1) aim to address the existing unequal and unfair practices and other structural challenges in the peacebuilding field, 2) consider the methodological challenges in measuring progress and results in peacebuilding, and 3) are designed based on the needs and participation of local peacebuilders.

2. Methodology

The co-development project of Felm and Valoa aims to develop an evidence-based, co-designed pilot concept for a digital solution, that addresses the needs and priorities of the local peace actors. The project has been structured into three distinct yet interconnected phases: a desk phase, interview and co-creation phase, and a synthesis phase. Each phase is carefully crafted to ensure a thorough and participatory approach, so that the findings are robust, evidence-based, and aligned especially with the MEL needs of local peacebuilders.

The desk phase reviewed existing literature, including academic papers, NGO reports, case studies, and other documentation related to M&E in locally led peacebuilding¹ as well as mapped the digital tools used in peacebuilding and/or M&E. The focus was on identifying both M&E challenges and needs as well as the best practices and innovative approaches that have been successfully implemented in real-world scenarios. Digital tool mapping evaluated the strengths, limitations, and relevance of these tools for local peacebuilders.

To complement the desk review, the co-creation phase gathered first-hand insights from key stakeholders involved in peacebuilding efforts. Based on findings of the desk phase, Felm and Valoa team designed an online survey and a co-creation workshop. The online survey was distributed to local peacebuilders and international peace practitioners—it received 20 responses, of which majority (13) identified themselves as “local peacebuilders”. The survey was designed to (1.) Collect the needs and challenges of MEL and of measuring progress and results in locally led peacebuilding and to (2.) Collect experiences about the use and usefulness of digital tools as well as needs and challenges linked to digital tools in MEL, specifically in relation to locally led peacebuilding. The survey questions and summary charts of multiple-choice survey responses are provided in Annex 1.

A co-creation workshop, which reached some 12 participants, was conducted with a diverse mix of local peacebuilders and international peace practitioners. These discussions served as a platform for verifying and confirming the key MEL needs of local peacebuilders, and in case of a digital solution, to ensure that it aligns with the aforementioned needs. The workshop was facilitated in a manner that encouraged open dialogue and the sharing of experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities in different contexts. Agenda and analysis from these workshops can be found in annex 2.

The synthesis phase was dedicated to analysing and synthesizing the findings from the desk review, survey, and co-creation workshop. Through a process of triangulation, the findings were compared and contrasted to identify common themes and unique insights. This phase involved an assessment how the identified needs can be addressed with the aid of digital technology. By evaluating the potential of existing digital tools and identifying gaps, this phase informed the development of recommendations for future digital solutions.

¹ In this report “locally led peacebuilding” refers to objectives and activities which are designed and implemented by local peacebuilders and actors (for example, civil society actors, religious actors, social movements, communities or other relevant local change agents) and which aim at contributing towards peaceful and sustainable change in local communities and societies. See also 3.1.

3. Evolving notions of peacebuilding and M&E paradigm

This chapter examines what kind of changes peacebuilding and mediation as well as M&E have gone through in recent decades. It also addresses how the call for decolonization has affected these sectors. The chapter also highlights how some of the findings of the survey and co-creation workshop correspond to this current state of art.

3.1. The recent evolution of peacebuilding and mediation

The practice and tenets of peacebuilding and mediation have undergone a marked evolution in recent decades. This is shaped by various issues—on the one hand by the growing complexity of global conflicts, the fragmentation of political actors and multipolarity. On the other hand, the emergence of new geopolitical realities and changes in global power structures—including the weakening role of international norms and multilateral institutions (such as the UN), which used to play a key part in maintaining peace, security and human rights—call for re-evaluation.

The international peacebuilding framework has its roots in the 1990's “liberal peace” agenda and, for example, in the United Nations comprehensive strategy for preventing and resolving conflicts outlined in 1992.² Nowadays, it is broadly and internationally acknowledged (e.g. through the introduction of the UN's sustaining peace agenda 2018, and the New Agenda for Peace 2023³) that there are limitations and problems with the liberal peacebuilding approach, and with the traditional, linear and pre-determined peace and state-building interventions. It has been increasingly recognized, both within academia and policy, that the understanding of peace process progressing through a rigid set of phases does not mirror the inherently complex process of creating pathways towards peaceful, inclusive societies.⁴ According to Paffenholz (2021), peacebuilding is “inherently dynamic process with a potential multiplicity of strands and entry-points”.⁵

It is clear, that the contexts where peacebuilding takes place have become more complex with interconnected and systemic challenges, such as the climate change or growing inequality. Also, different peace initiatives and processes themselves form a complex web and ecosystem, where local, national, regional and international actors and interests play various roles, often with little synergies and collaboration—sometimes fuelled with competition and ideas brought from outside. Enhancing and advancing sustainable and just peace is a complex and highly contextual change process without “fit for all” and simple solutions. Therefore, a slowly emerging consensus (at least rhetorically) is to seek more adaptive and locally led solutions for protracted conflicts, to consider the context-specific interpretations of peace and to recognize unequal power structures embedded in the international peacebuilding framework. It is acknowledged that even though external actors can, and they should play a positive role in supporting peace efforts the success of peacebuilding and conflict transformation relies primarily on the actions, interests, and strategies of local entities. The new paradigm of peacebuilding shifts the focus away from the international peacebuilding “industry”, foregrounding instead the

2 United Nations (1992) An Agenda for Peace. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/145749?ln=en&v=pdf>

3 United Nations (2018) Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace: Report of the Secretary-General. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1468106?v=pdf>

4 Paffenholz, T. (2021) Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15(3), pp. 367–385.

5 *Ibid*, 368.

communities facing conflict and the local and national actors that build their peace.⁶ Also, the decline of multilateralism can create more opportunities for locally led peace initiatives and processes. On the other hand, risks and instability may increase on a global scale if international standards are viewed as weakening and no longer binding.

Mediation has been adapted to the changing peace-making context as well. Once primarily envisioned as a path to comprehensive peace agreements following large-scale violence, mediation has become a more flexible, multifaceted instrument, increasingly focused on incremental gains, conflict mitigation, and the maintenance of fragile political dialogue. According to the 2024 Donor–Practitioner Roundtable convened by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), contemporary mediation operates in a “changing political and conflict landscape characterised by increasing geopolitical competition, rising inter-state conflict, and growing political polarisation”.⁷ This landscape has demanded a significant shift in how mediation is designed, implemented, and evaluated. Rather than aiming solely for comprehensive settlements, mediators are often compelled to pursue more modest yet impactful goals, such as ceasefires, humanitarian corridors, and partial agreements. These initiatives may not resolve the underlying conflict but serve to alleviate suffering, reduce violence, and maintain the possibility for future dialogue.⁸ In the field of mediation as well, there is growing recognition of inside and local mediators’ role.⁹

During the past decade there has been growing recognition to address decolonization, racism and unequal power relations, in international cooperation (humanitarian aid, development cooperation and peacebuilding). Varying vocabulary has been used, for example, localization, shifting the power, and locally led approach. In this report the term locally led peacebuilding is used: it refers to an approach where local people, groups and civil society organizations design their own approaches and set priorities, whilst outsiders may assist with resources.¹⁰ As put by Peace Direct, in locally led peacebuilding the key is that local peacebuilders and/or inside mediators have high levels of trust, accountability and legitimacy among their constituencies. They are able to set their own strategic direction, priorities and programmatic focus and determine their own leadership and governance structures.¹¹ Moreover, “locally led” should not refer to geographical location—local peacebuilders can operate on range of levels, community, sub-national and national. Firchow (2020) points out that defining what and who is meant by “local actor” in each case is also important, as multiple actors can fall into that category—national governments, subnational governments, national civil society actors, local civil society actors, and individuals, among others. It is also important to acknowledge and be sensitive to various hierarchies and power relations within local actors. In an effort to work with locals, international peacebuilders often rely on the same group of urban and elite civil society representatives, which reinforces cycles of exclusion of marginalized groups and results in power imbalances¹²

The ongoing evolution in the peacebuilding and mediation field has not only had an impact to the contents, approaches and focus of peacework, but also to the monitoring and evaluation of peacebuilding.

6 Paffenholz, T. (2021) *Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding*, p. 380.

7 Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (2024) *Outcome Statement: 2024 Donor–Practitioner M&E Roundtable*, pp. 1–2.

8 *ibid.*

9 See, for example, the Network for Traditional and Religious Peace Makers, www.peacemakersnetwork.org/tfims/

10 Peace Direct (2020) *Towards locally led peacebuilding: Defining local*.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Firchow, P. (2020) *Using Everyday Peace Indicators to Increase Local Ownership*. In: Graff, C. (ed.) *Addressing Fragility in a Global Pandemic: Elements of a Successful US Strategy*. United States Institute of Peace (USIP), p. 16.

3.2. Monitoring & evaluation in peacebuilding

“I am definitely in favour of tracking change and investing in better understanding HOW to best support transformation, but we need to stop relying on tools and approaches that were designed for an entirely different purpose.” (Comment from the online survey)

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)¹³ traditionally refers to the systematic process of tracking and assessing the progress and performance of a project or program. It focuses on answering questions related to whether the project is on track, meeting its objectives, and delivering the intended outcomes. M&E often involves data collection, analysis and reporting, providing valuable information to project managers and stakeholders. Initially, M&E was primarily focused on data collection and reporting to donors. Its main purpose was to measure project outputs and compliance with funding requirements. However, as the development sector evolved, so did the role of M&E. It began to emphasize not just what was done (outputs) but also whether it made a meaningful difference (outcomes and impacts).

M&E system and methods common in development sector have been applied in many peacebuilding programmes, partly due to donor requirements, However, this has posed challenges in terms of tracking the results of peacebuilding efforts, which don't follow plans of linear progress.¹⁴ Due to the overall growing complexity of the operational environment, the unsuitability of traditional M&E thinking has been acknowledged in the development sector more as well.

The online survey¹⁵ conducted as part of this project revealed four related overarching insights in relation to M&E in peacebuilding. The issues related to complexity (1.) and adaptiveness (2.) are addressed in this chapter, while points 3 and 4, connected to locally led peacebuilding, are reflected in chapter 3.3.:

- 1. Complex nature of peacebuilding context:** Constantly changing contexts makes it difficult to measure social change. Peace is a result of multiple factors and therefore traditional M&E methods are not fit for purpose.
- 2. Learning Over Performance:** A majority of respondents indicated that MEL systems should prioritise reflection, iterative adaptation, and shared learning, rather than focusing solely on donor accountability requirements.
- 3. Disconnection from Operational Realities:** Existing MEL tools were often described as burdensome, overly quantitative, time-consuming, and ill-suited to capturing the nuanced realities of local peacebuilding work.
- 4. Locally Defined Meaning:** Terms such as “peace,” “impact,” “success” were perceived as externally imposed. Respondents consistently advocated for defining such terms through local cultural, linguistic, and contextual lenses.

In traditional M&E approaches, programmes are designed and planned at the start, and implementation is expected to adhere to those plans throughout the programme lifetime.¹⁶ In this case,

¹³ This report uses consistently term monitoring and evaluation, while acknowledging the different contents of monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) as well as design/planning, monitoring, evaluation and learning (D/PMEL), as well as accountability (e.g. MEAL).

¹⁴ See also Wadley, I. (2017) Valuing Peace: Delivering and Demonstrating Mediation Results. Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre).

¹⁵ Please, see more detailed survey results and analysis in the annex 1.

¹⁶ Rogers, Patricia and Macfarlan, Alice (2017), Does evaluation need to be done differently to support adaptive management? Blog of Better Evaluation.

monitoring is based on pre-defined indicators, focusing mainly on activities and outputs. Evaluation is designed to assess performance at a point in time and learning is seen more as an option than necessity.¹⁷ Peace builders and mediators work in situations with a high degree of uncertainty and unpredictability. Scenario thinking as a regular practice helps to underscore that, but no scenario will accurately predict the future. In the business sector this is referred to as a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous). In the aid sector, the key term has often been complexity, as understood in David Snowden's Cynefin framework. It implies there are no clear causal relationships and confident pathways from inputs to outcomes.¹⁸ Apgar et al (2024) also claim that by its very nature, peacebuilding efforts occur in "intricate, dynamic and potentially volatile contexts, characterised by systemic relationships involving multiple actors, both local and international. These contexts¹⁹ do not follow stable trajectories and frequently undergo unpredictable changes in their causal landscapes"²⁰ The ability to identify and follow this unpredictable causal landscape is thus key for peacebuilding efforts.

Many peacebuilding organisations have adopted an adaptive approach. Adaptive Management is an approach to deal with complex problems and context. It emphasises continuous learning and systematic reflection throughout the programme period. Monitoring context and how it influences programming is important, as is participation of broad range of stakeholders as well as local ownership. In adaptive approach, monitoring covers change at all levels from activities to impact; indicators and M&E tools / methods are constantly being refined. Evaluation is conducted throughout a programme, designed to enhance performance, and learning is seen as an essential and integral part of the programme.²¹ This learning perspective has attached the "L" in M&E. Use of data for informed decision making is emphasised. M&E has thus attempted to transform from a compliance-oriented process to a strategic tool for program improvement and impact assessment.

The need for adaptiveness came evident from survey respondents' comments:

"As of now, the traditional approaches in the [peacebuilding] ecosystem makes MEL a burdening practice, mainly for local actors that projects claim to serve. MEL should be an enjoyable, learning process, that allows all involved parties to reflect, learn, adapt and grow as work progresses." (Comment from the online survey)

Moreover, in the field of peacebuilding M&E, techniques like "Results Validation", participatory "Most Significant Change" storytelling, and "Attribution Based on Context" have been used as credible ways to capture the often intangible and incremental impacts of mediation and peacebuilding.²² Adaptive approaches use e.g. outcome harvesting methodology to identify, describe, verify and analyse outcomes or changes brought by the programme. Ruby Quantson Davis²³ notes, that "approaches such as outcome harvesting and most significant outcomes offer a significant shift in traditional evaluation

17 Simister, Nigel (2018), Adaptive Management. INTRAC for Civil Society.

18 Van Brabant, Koenraad (2022: 50-51). Impact Study for Felm Peacebuilding (Unpublished).

19 Apgar et al. (2024) propose an "Inclusive Rigour" framework, that calls for an iterative, learning-oriented approach, where evaluation methods evolve in response to shifting conditions on the ground. The framework embraces methodological pluralism, allowing evaluators to use diverse tools and approaches tailored to the complexities of each context.

20 Apgar, Marina et al. (2024), Rethinking rigour to embrace complexity in peacebuilding evaluation. Evaluation, Vol 3, Issue 3.

21 Simister, Nigel (2018), Adaptive Management. INTRAC for Civil Society.

22 Cheyanne Church and Mark M. Rogers (2006) Designing for Results: Integrating Monitoring and Evaluation in Conflict Transformation Programs, Search for Common Ground. These techniques were also raised by the respondents in the survey

23 Quantson Davis, Ruby (2023): Liberated or Recolonised: Making the Case for Embodied Evaluation in Peacebuilding. Journal for Multi-Disciplinary Evaluation.

from reliance on collecting data to measure predetermined indicators to recognizing the importance of flexing to understand unforeseen outcomes.” However, she also marks that these efforts will have even greater impact if they recognize and address power relations that determine who and what are credible knowledge systems and outcomes.²⁴ Apgar et al.²⁵ note that complexity-aware evaluations should emphasize continuous feedback loops, real-time adaptation, and the co-creation of evaluation metrics with local actors. This model aligns with participatory methodologies, ensuring that peacebuilding interventions remain responsive to the lived realities of affected communities.

Despite of this transformation of M&E practices, in practise the changes seem to progress slowly. The next chapter looks at how power imbalances still affect M&E practices and requirements. Moreover, those who are at the centre of the peacebuilding activities rarely have the opportunity to take part in defining what constitutes successful results and how to evaluate peacebuilding efforts.

3.3. Decolonizing M&E

As highlighted in this report, the M&E in peacebuilding, or more generally in international cooperation, is one of the practices that needs reimagination. When it comes to peacebuilding, as pointed out by Dickson, decolonizing M&E requires a critical examination of the power dynamics inherent in peacebuilding: colonial structures and mindsets continue to shape our approaches to knowledge production, evaluation, and learning.²⁶ Considering this, we seem to be in a situation, where we know what should be done to advance things—but something is holding us back. The two main interlinked topics to address in decolonization of M&E are accountability and the role of local community.

Ruby Quantson Davis²⁷ (2023) writes that key among the power imbalances that conversation on decolonization has exposed is the relationship between funder/donors and the so called “recipients of aid”. This relationship is characterized by the implementation of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as a compliance and accountability mechanism.²⁸ Quantson Davis claims that M&E forms one of the central means by which institutions of power continue to maintain control.²⁹

In many cases, donors (both donor countries and INGOs) continue to see monitoring and evaluation as a condition for funding, means of control and upward accountability. The one putting in the money is defining also the requirements of M&E. Gervin Chanase (2025) notes that “MEL revolves around assessing the worth of results achieved. Digging deeper, this value is inherently tied to resources, invested to create a chain of outcomes. Ultimately, it all circles back to one critical factor, funding. As Sarah Lister (2000) and others have opined, funding operates as a highly sought-after commodity in the current transactional ‘marketplace’ that is the aid ecosystem, far outweighing other resources in terms of influence and leverage like social capital, local assets and knowledge that local southern partners bring to the table.”³⁰

24 Ibid., 223

25 Apgar, Marina et al. (2024), Rethinking rigour to embrace complexity in peacebuilding evaluation. *Evaluation*, Vol 3, Issue 3.

26 Dickson, Prince Charles (2024): Unpacking the power dynamics of peacebuilding: towards locally led MEL. *Peace Insight*.

27 Quantson Davis, Ruby (2023): Liberated or Recolonised: Making the Case for Embodied Evaluation in Peacebuilding. *Journal for Multi-Disciplinary Evaluation*.

28 Gasper (1999) in Quantson Davis, Ruby (2023). Liberated or Recolonised: Making the Case for Embodied Evaluation in Peacebuilding. *Journal for Multi-Disciplinary Evaluation*.

29 Quantson Davis, Ruby (2023): Liberated or Recolonised: Making the Case for Embodied Evaluation in Peacebuilding. *Journal for Multi-Disciplinary Evaluation*.

30 Chanase, Gervin (2025). Rebalancing International Development Cooperation: The Urgency of Shifting Power in Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL). Blog. Citing Sarah Lister (2000), Power in Partnership? An Analysis of an NGO’s Relationships with Its Partners. See also, Chanase, Gervin (2025): Who holds the lens? Reimagining Power in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning. See also, Middernacht, Zdena et. al (2023): Decolonizing monitoring and evaluation: from control to learning. INTRAC for Civil Society. Blog text.

As mentioned in previous chapter, the international development efforts increasingly emphasize the importance of inclusive and adaptive approaches, thus there is a corresponding call to rethink M&E frameworks to better support the peacebuilding efforts that are led by local actors. This shift is driven by the understanding that effective peacebuilding must be grounded in local realities and priorities, necessitating M&E systems that are context-aware and adaptive.³¹ However, prioritizing upward accountability, while hoping to ensure financial accountability, often ends up overlooking the nuanced needs and perspectives of local communities.³² Upward accountability can even result in MEL frameworks being misaligned with the needs and priorities of local communities. This misalignment can lead to e.g. evaluations that do not accurately reflect the impact of interventions on the ground, thereby limiting their usefulness for local stakeholders.³³ Another issue is that funding is usually given to a specific time period, during which planned objectives would be achieved. This is unrealistic in case of peacebuilding, where results rarely happen in a short time frame. Peacebuilding requires long term commitment from donors. Similar challenges came up clearly in the survey responses that focused on MEL challenges in locally led peacebuilding (see Box 1).

Box 1.

Key challenges and barriers to MEL in locally led peacebuilding

Survey responders and workshop participants highlighted a series of structural, cultural, and practical challenges and barriers when it comes to MEL in locally led peacebuilding.

1. Incompatibility of MEL tools with peacebuilding timeframes

“Peacebuilding work is time-intensive, something that can take decades... but MEL tools assume short timelines.”

“We can only see outcomes or results in 3 or 5 years, which will be very big and significant outcomes.”

2. Lack of community participation and local ownership

“MEL indicators must be co-created and revalidated with local actors.”

“The systems of MEL must include the active participation of communities.”

3. Rigid indicator frameworks

“The standard MEL process is often quite rigid and inhibits how we tell stories.”

“Indicators are ‘set in stone’ and do not adapt to changing local contexts.”

“There’s too much focus on standardised measurements without embracing the diverse nature of conflict and its context.”

4. Security constraints

“Staff members cannot visit communities due to safety and security concerns.”

“Changing and violent contexts make it hard to collect relevant information; communities are less open due to safety issues.”

31 Coger, T., S. Corry, and R. Gregorowski (2021), Reshaping Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning for Locally Led Adaptation. Working Paper. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute.

32 Ibid.

33 Synthesis Review of UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) 2021–2022 Evaluations and Evaluative Exercises (2023).

Moreover, traditional M&E systems often rely heavily on external experts, which can further marginalize local voices and expertise. This reliance on external knowledge not only undermines local capacity but also fails to leverage the rich contextual understanding that local actors possess.³⁴

Another aspect is who gets to define and evaluate the successfulness of a peacebuilding initiative. How success is framed in peacebuilding is debated inside the sector - traditionally success refers to the absence of violence, but this is very narrow definition and far from describing the transformation. However, Paffenholz (2021) claims that the effectiveness of an intervention cannot be judged by the achievement of an “end-point”. Peacebuilders must refrain from speaking of ‘success’ or ‘failure’ and instead adopt new terms and language which capture the perpetual nature of peacebuilding.³⁵ Thus, how we understand the nature of peace affects how we use monitoring and evaluation for peacebuilding—and what kind of terminology we use about it.

Also, Quantson Davis (2023) points, that if local communities are given the right to determine their own ways of monitoring and evaluating peace work, using assessments that are contextually meaningful, sponsors and communities are more likely to learn about conflict and peacebuilding in ways that will inform implementation of programmes and sustain peace work. For example, in case of Everyday Peace indicators it is stated that instead outside experts and scholars developing indicators of success, communities themselves are asked to define their own indicators that they use to measure successful peace in their own communities. This approach is driven by the premise that communities affected by the war know best what peace means to them and therefore should be the primary source of information on peacebuilding effectiveness. This approach seeks to complement, not replace, orthodox indicators, thus fostering learning for both outsiders and locals.³⁶

Quantson Davis also highlights the recent addition of “learning” to monitoring and evaluation (MEL), which suggests a need to learn in order to inform programmes through the insights gained, as well as the need for project holders to learn from local actors and enable the latter to lead the processes. In some places, this has been called “localising MEL” as a means of decolonising MEL. Quantson Davis criticizes this approach, arguing that “however, localising MEL continues to suggest that MEL is some established formula that ought to be adapted to local settings or ‘domesticated’ rather than reframed. If approaches for MEL have to be localized, they may still not qualify as decolonizing processes, because, at root, they are still methods defined elsewhere that will not embody the cultural sensitivities required in particular indigenous settings”.³⁷

Kris Inman calls for centering the perspectives of those directly affected by violence, noting that if we treat only externally defined indicators as valid, we risk ignoring the relevant signals that matter most to people living in conflict.³⁸ Inman continues that “in peacebuilding, different stakeholders will often define success differently—and that’s not a problem to solve, it’s a reality to embrace to help us truly understand what’s going on and how to create change”.³⁹ She recommends redefining success in peacebuilding from a narrow focus on preventing violence to a broader vision of building the conditions for

34 Coger, T., S. Corry, and R. Gregorowski (2021), *Reshaping Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning for Locally Led Adaptation*. Working Paper. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute.

35 Paffenholz, Thania (2021: 378), *Perpetual Peacebuilding: A New Paradigm to Move Beyond the Linearity of Liberal Peacebuilding*. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 15:3, 367-385.

36 [Everydaypeaceindicators.org/how-does-epi-work](https://everydaypeaceindicators.org/how-does-epi-work) (developed by Roger MacGinty and Pamina Firchow)

37 Bowman et al (2015) in Quantson Davis (2023) *Liberated or Recolonised: Making the Case for Embodied Evaluation in Peacebuilding*. *Journal for Multi-Disciplinary Evaluation*. p. 222

38 See Kris Inman (2025): *Redefining Success in Peacebuilding*.

39 Kris Inman addresses elevating multiple forms of evidence. The challenge is in capturing data efficiently and effectively, providing contextual knowledge and impact measurement in a manner which is relevant to all stakeholders.

people and communities to thrive (for example by tracking the presence of positive peace indicators).⁴⁰

While there is broad consensus on the need for more inclusive and locally led M&E practices, significant tensions and trade-offs remain. One key challenge for an INGO—often placed as an intermediary between donor and local actor - can be balancing donor expectations with the autonomy of local communities. Many funding agencies still require standardized indicators and quantitative measures to justify continued investment, creating resistance to more flexible, qualitative approaches⁴¹. This “rigour trap” places evaluators in a difficult position—attempting to meet donor demands while striving to incorporate participatory and decolonized principles.

The survey findings overall signal a strong need and requirements for adaptable, inclusive MEL approaches that enable peacebuilders and communities to reflect, learn, and evolve in real time. It is also clear, based on the survey responses, that there was a strong consensus about the proposed MEL needs and challenges in locally led peacebuilding.⁴² Some respondents also commented that MEL needs in locally led peacebuilding proposed in the multiple-choice questions in the survey were true, but also quite “self-evident” and “not new”.⁴³ The question should rather be put “why we are not changing the ways of working but continue holding in the methods and tools we know are not working?”. As put by one of the survey responders:

“I think a more important question to ask is why, when we know these things [identified needs] are important, do we continue to promote/use the same tools and approaches? What is holding us back from overhauling how we do MEL? Who are the gatekeepers/power holders that are helping to maintain the status quo? Is it the lack of appropriate tools or a systems level problem and how can we mobilise the necessary support for new ways of learning within this system?” (Comment from the survey)

The problem is that the required change is not only technical, but political and cultural—and what is the most urgently needed is the systemic change in the international peacebuilding framework. We in the minority world (Global North) should change our own mindsets when it comes to measuring results and impact. This starts by doing critical self-reflection both at the individual and organizational levels, stepping outside of the comfort zone and seeing beyond those familiar methods, frameworks and practices.

“We need to look at revamping the tools we use but also transforming the cultural ecosystem they are applied within. If we still implement them against unrealistic timelines, or fail to fund the time needed for reflection, new tools will remain sidelined.” (Comment from the survey)

The real change in MEL practices is not happening until there is appetite from all actors, including donors, to accept uncertainties when creating and testing something new. In this first part of the report, we have highlighted some already existing practical efforts, tools and methods to improve the peacebuilding MEL as well as reflected on the need to further decolonize the current MEL practices. The second part of the report focuses on the digital solutions to support MEL and considerations for digital tools to support MEL in locally led peacebuilding.

40 See e.g. Positive Peace Index and Peace Impact Framework

41 Coger, T., S. Corry, and R. Gregorowski (2021), *Reshaping Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning for Locally Led Adaptation*. Working Paper. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute.

42 See the multiple-choice responses on needs and challenges in Annex 1

43 See Annex 1

4. Digital technology in peacebuilding M&E

This section explores the role of technology in peacebuilding in general, as well as how technology can address the specific needs and challenges of M&E in locally led peacebuilding. It outlines features that are prominent for a digital tool to be useful in the context of local peacebuilding.

Technology has reshaped peacebuilding and mediation. Digital peacebuilding refers to a range of digital tools and technologies designed to prevent conflicts, resolve disputes, and promote peace and stability in communities and regions affected by conflicts or unrest. It involves applying various technological solutions, such as data analysis, social media platforms, mobile applications, and artificial intelligence (AI), to address the root causes of conflicts, facilitate communication and foster understanding. New digital technologies provide peacebuilders with opportunities to, for example, mobilise communities, spread messages of peace, and monitor conflicts in real time. On the other hand, social media and digital platforms can be used to spread misinformation, radicalise individuals, and coordinate violent actions. AI is being increasingly studied as a tool for enhancing peacebuilding activities. For example, AI technologies have the potential to significantly improve conflict analysis, early warning systems, and the facilitation of dialogue in complex peace processes. However, features such as the partiality of AI algorithms and video, audio and image manipulations pose challenges, as these can make it difficult to distinguish truthful information from false information. It is acknowledged that the reliance on digital tools, particularly when not designed with active community participation, can inadvertently reinforce existing power dynamics and inequalities. For example, PeaceTech is predominantly developed and deployed by communities in the Global North, while its operational focus often centres on the Global South.⁴⁴ Moreover, digital technology can increase inequality as not all have similar opportunities for using and accessing the digital technology.

Technology is also playing an increasingly important role in M&E of peacebuilding, with new tools and approaches emerging to facilitate data collection, analysis, and reporting. This trend is driven by the increasing availability of digital devices, the growing recognition of the potential of technology to enhance peacebuilding efforts, and the need for more efficient and effective M&E systems.⁴⁵

4.1. Experiences of existing digital tools used in peacebuilding M&E

Technology offers powerful tools and approaches that are reshaping how local actors engage in or conduct peacebuilding processes. By expanding access to information and digital platforms, it can empower communities to advocate for their needs, participate more effectively in decision-making, and support initiatives that are more inclusive, participatory, and locally owned.⁴⁶

In the survey and co-creation workshop the respondents brought up examples where they see the potential for advancing digital technology or where digital technology is already used in relation to MEL. The examples included storytelling e.g. through community videos; participation of communities to assess progress and results of activities; iterative adaptation; and experiential learning over static reporting. Respondents also highlighted to pay attention to inclusive and accessible tools—to avoid jargon-heavy or overly technical systems and focus on formats familiar and more accessible to local communities. Finally, it was emphasized by the respondents that in the organizations (both interna-

44 Yerrapureddy, Poorvi and Nanda, Amrita (2025), *The Paradox of Peacetech: Agency or Alienation*.

45 Corlazzoli, Vanessa / *Search for Common Ground* (2014), *ICTs for Monitoring & Evaluation of Peacebuilding Programmes*.

46 Peace Direct (2023: 5), *Digital Pathways to Peace, Insights and lessons from a global online consultation*

tional and local) there has to be an internal cultural shift towards developing the learning cultures.

The benefits of digital tools are evident across several dimensions. Mobile data collection platforms like KoboToolbox and ODK⁴⁷ allow organisations to gather information with greater accuracy and efficiency, often in real time. These mobile applications allow for reporting on incidents, human rights violations, and programme activities. This helps overcome delays associated with paper-based reporting while also creating space for communities to contribute data directly. Mobile applications enhance the ability of local peacebuilders to track incidents, identify trends, and adapt interventions quickly, ensuring responses are both timely and evidence based. Geographic Information Systems (GIS), such as ArcGIS and QGIS, provide vital mapping capabilities to visualise patterns of displacement or violence, helping practitioners plan more targeted interventions.⁴⁸

Equally important, technology strengthens communication and collaboration among diverse actors. Tools such as Microsoft Teams and Slack enable organisations, even in resource-constrained settings, to share information across geographic divides, coordinate activities, and build stronger networks. Early Warning and Response Systems (EWARS), which integrate data from local monitors and external sources, illustrate how digital platforms can facilitate collective action in the face of escalating risks.

Transparency and accountability have also benefited from technological innovation. Blockchain-based platforms like Alice have been piloted to track financial flows, improving trust by ensuring funds reach intended beneficiaries. Meanwhile, dashboards built with Power BI or Tableau make progress reports accessible not only to donors but also to local stakeholders, reinforcing accountability between peacebuilders and the communities they serve.

Beyond these operational applications, a wide array of specialized digital tools and resources can support M&E in peacebuilding. Centralized repositories such as the United Nation's Peace and Security Data Hub aggregate diverse resources, from datasets to publications, creating a valuable knowledge base for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.⁴⁹ Macro-level indices like the Global Peace Index⁵⁰, Fragile States Index, and SDG 16 indicators provide insights into broader conflict trends, while granular datasets such as Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)⁵¹ and conflict monitor ACLED⁵² capture detailed information on incidents and violence patterns. Thematic datasets on governance, human rights, displacement, and development, complemented by surveys like Afrobarometer and Arab Barometer, add critical local perspectives.

There are various specialized M&E toolkits available that address or touch upon using digital tools. are further enriching practice. For example, the CDA Collaborative Learning DME Training Package⁵³ (2019) provides practical support for designing conflict-sensitive digital MEL systems. Miro or Mural⁵⁴ whiteboards can also be useful for project teams to organize outcome mapping or harvesting, regardless of their location.

47 See kobotoolbox.org and getodk.org

48 Al-khafaji, Shawq Salman et al (2024), Mapping Solutions: Integrating GIS and Web Maps to Address Crisis in Iraq.

49 See, <https://psdata.un.org/>

50 See, for example, Institute for Economics and Peace (n.d.) Global Peace Index Maps. Available at: <https://www.visionof-humanity.org/maps/#/>. See also Institute for Economics and Peace (n.d.) Global Peace Index. Available www.economicsandpeace.org/global-peace-index/

51 See Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) (n.d.) UCDP Data Portal. Available at: <https://ucdp.uu.se/#/>.

52 See www.acleddata.com/conflict-monitors

53 See Ernstorfer, A. & Barnard-Webster, K. (2019) Peacebuilding Design, Monitoring and Evaluation: A Training Package for Participants and Trainers at Intermediate to Advanced Levels. CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

54 See [Miro.com](https://miro.com) and [Mural.co](https://mural.co)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology has shaped the peacebuilding and mediation fields, e.g. through large-scale digital dialogues and platforms or large language models. Also, AI can and has been utilized in M&E, e.g. in data collection, in enabling real time insights or in reporting, where AI is used to speed up the text production and analysis. In a recent discussion on AI and conflict resolution and peacebuilding, organized by Belfer Centre (Harvard Kennedy School), it was concluded that AI is neither a magic solution nor an existential threat on its own—AI’s impact depends largely on how it is designed, deployed, and governed. It was also stressed that there has to be a dual approach: leveraging AI’s capabilities to enhance human decision making while remaining vigilant about bias, disinformation risks, outside corporate influence, and oversimplification.⁵⁵ Building AI literacy is important - learning to use media responsibly, verifying information, understanding the agenda behind it, and distinguish between what is real and what is fake, as well as ensuring that AI systems used in conflict resolution are ethically grounded, contextually aware, and appropriately governed.⁵⁶

Also, the survey responders and participants in the co-creation workshop reported a mixed landscape in terms of digital knowledge and tool adoption in M&E. See the summary in Box 2. Notably, some respondents said that they do not use digital tools at all in their peacebuilding work.

Box 2.
**Summary of the survey and workshop results
on existing digital tools used in MEL**

Common use of accessible tools:

Tools like Google Drive, Excel, Microsoft Teams, and online survey forms are widely used due to their affordability and ease of access.

Mixed methodologies:

Some organisations use more sophisticated tools (e.g. Zoho, MAXQDA) to blend qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

Cloud storage is the norm:

Platforms like Google Drive, OneDrive, and LAN-based systems are used for storing and sharing documents.

Digital divide and capacity gaps:

A number of respondents indicated they do not use digital tools at all, or were unsure what their teams used, highlighting a critical capacity gap.

Growing interest in data visualisation:

Some teams are beginning to use Excel dashboards and simple visual tools to support real-time decision-making.

55 See Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs (2025) AI and the Future of Conflict Resolution: How Can Artificial Intelligence Improve Peace Negotiations?

56 Ibid, see also Camilli, Edoardo (2024), Integrating Technology and the Human Dimension in Peacebuilding. European Institute of Peace.

It is clear that the integration of technology into peacebuilding monitoring and evaluation brings significant challenges as well. Chief among these is the digital divide. Unequal access to reliable internet and limited digital literacy often mirror and exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities, particularly between genders or between urban and rural populations. For example, while mobile apps have been successfully deployed in some urban contexts, rural communities with weak connectivity often find themselves excluded from such initiatives. In conflict areas, deliberate cutting of internet connections to cause information blackouts can also happen.⁵⁷

Data security and privacy pose further concerns. In conflict-affected settings, sensitive information collected through surveys or early-warning systems must be rigorously protected. Breaches not only undermine trust but can also put individuals at risk of targeted harm. This has been observed in contexts where information about community affiliations or displacement patterns was exposed, heightening vulnerability. For example, a data breach (by e.g. cyber attack) affecting humanitarian organizations exposed personal data (names, locations, contact information) of missing people and their families, unaccompanied/ separated children, and other vulnerable groups, raising serious safety risks.⁵⁸

Sustainability is another recurring issue. Tools such as UN's Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE) or Field Remote Infrastructure Monitoring (FRIM)⁵⁹ have demonstrated their potential in peacekeeping contexts, but they require ongoing maintenance, technical support, and stable infrastructure. Section 4.2. explores SAGE solution further. These technical demands are often difficult for local organizations with limited resources, unreliable connectivity, or even frequent power outages to meet.

Finally, the relevance of digital tools is not guaranteed. Unless systems are designed to reflect intended users' needs and preferences, including local languages, cultural norms, and lived realities, they risk being underutilized or even rejected. This has been the case with some donor-driven platforms that prioritized standardized indicators over community-defined measures of peace, making them ill-suited to the contexts where they were introduced.⁶⁰

It can be summarized that the digital platforms, datasets, and toolkits showcase the breadth of resources already available to peacebuilders. When used wisely with needed technical support available, they can provide both quantitative and qualitative frameworks to capture complex realities, while also pointing toward innovative, participatory, and adaptive approaches that can make peacebuilding more effective and responsive to the needs of communities.

4.2 Assessment of existing digital tools

While the digital tools mentioned previously highlight the breadth of available digital solutions, enterprise-level systems such as UN Peacekeeping's Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE) warrant closer examination. Indeed, digital tools are relatively lightweight, flexible, and adaptable to project and community-level use. They address specific tasks (such as data collection, reporting, or analysis) and can often be adopted with modest resources.

57 See e.g. Myanmar coup: How the military disrupted the internet, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55889565>

58 See, for example, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (2022), *Cyber-attack targets Red Cross Red Crescent data* | ICRC

59 See, *Unite Field Remote Infrastructure Monitoring*, <https://frim.un.org/>

60 Schwandt, T.A. & Vähäsantanen, K. (2024) *Digitalization in Evaluations and Evaluations of Digitalization: The Changing Landscape of Evaluations*.

By contrast, enterprise-level systems like SAGE represent large-scale, institutionalised platforms designed and deployed primarily within UN peacekeeping missions. In developing digital tools that respond to diverse local needs while providing clear impact metrics, there is much to be learned from existing solutions. They embody both the potential and the pitfalls of digital innovation in peacebuilding. On the one hand, their ability to integrate multiple data streams into comprehensive dashboards positions them as models for how complex, multi-source information can be synthesised to support M&E and decision-making. Their adoption by UN agencies also signals institutional legitimacy, significant investment, and operational use, factors that make them influential examples worth studying. On the other hand, these systems highlight the persistent tension between efficiency and inclusivity: while they enhance situational awareness and resource management at scale, they often do so in ways that sideline local actors and bypass community-defined indicators. Analysing them therefore not only reveals how large institutions commit and combine certain technologies but also underscores the risk of reinforcing top-down, donor-centric dynamics, rather than advancing the participatory and locally grounded approaches that M&E reform seeks to promote.

Though by no means exhaustive, these two examples provide the reader both with a clearer understanding of existing solutions as well as highlighting the real limits organisations face with existing solutions, ultimately not based on the technology itself, but the method and philosophy of data usage.

SAGE – UN Peacekeeping’s Situational Awareness Geospatial Enterprise (SAGE) SAGE is a web-based platform designed to improve situational awareness in peacekeeping missions by integrating data from multiple sources. It allows the UN personnel to log incidents, track patterns, and visualise hotspots in near real time. This can greatly enhance coordination among different mission units, military, police, and civilians, by ensuring they are all working from the same information base. As a result, SAGE can shorten response times, improve resource allocation, and provide stronger evidence for decision-making compared to traditional reporting methods.

Despite these advantages, SAGE illustrates several challenges. Its effectiveness depends heavily on the quality and timeliness of the data it receives. Incomplete or inaccurate incident reporting undermines the platform’s reliability, while the sheer volume of information can sometimes overwhelm users rather than guide them. Technical challenges are also common, particularly in remote environments where connectivity and electricity are unreliable. Furthermore, operating SAGE requires training and technical expertise, meaning that not all personnel can use it effectively.

From the perspective of local peacebuilders, SAGE presents both opportunities and limitations. The system’s ability to visualise conflict dynamics in real time could in theory support community-level actors in adapting their interventions. However, the tool is primarily designed for UN personnel and leaves little room for local input. Communities cannot easily feed in their own observations or define the indicators that matter most to them. As such, while SAGE enhances operational data management, it does not address questions of locally defined success, long-term transformation, or participatory evaluation.

Early Warning and Response Systems (EWARS)

In contrast to SAGE, Early Warning and Response Systems (EWARS) have more direct relevance for community-based peacebuilding. These systems aggregate data from multiple sources—ranging from local monitors to social media and news reports—to identify potential conflict triggers and provide timely alerts. Their greatest strength lies in their preventive function: by flagging risks early, they allow peacebuilders and communities to respond before violence escalates. EWARS can also improve coordination among actors and enable more targeted interventions in high-risk areas. Importantly,

many EWARS rely on community monitors, which creates opportunities for local participation and ownership. Yet, EWARS are not without problems. They can generate false alarms, which may lead to unnecessary interventions or erode trust in the system. Data quality is another recurring challenge, particularly in remote or volatile areas where information is incomplete or unreliable. There is also the risk of oversimplifying complex conflict dynamics, which can result in poorly tailored responses. Moreover, ethical concerns loom large: collecting and using sensitive data in conflict zones can expose individuals to new risks if privacy and security are not rigorously protected. In some cases, governments or other actors have manipulated such systems for political purposes, undermining their credibility and safety.

For local peacebuilders and M&E, EWARS hold significant potential when they are designed inclusively and ethically. By giving communities a role in monitoring threats and feeding back into decision-making, they can empower local actors and provide valuable data for adaptive learning. However, if designed in a top-down manner or controlled solely by external institutions, they risk reinforcing mistrust and exclusion. Their real value lies in bridging external data analysis with community-defined understandings of risk, resilience, and peace.

Reflections on local relevance and M&L

Taken together, these examples illustrate the limits of applying tools designed for large-scale, international peace operations directly to locally led initiatives. SAGE demonstrates the potential of digital systems to enhance coordination and efficiency, but the design and focus mean it largely bypasses local peacebuilders and fail to capture the nuances of community-led processes. EWARS, by contrast, has greater potential to involve communities and generate data that feeds into participatory M&E, but only when inclusivity, contextual sensitivity, and ethical safeguards are built into the system. These reflections demonstrate that while digital innovations can bring clear operational benefits, their utility for locally led peacebuilding and MEL depends heavily on design choices. Without mechanisms for local ownership, contextual adaptation, and participatory evaluation, such systems risk reinforcing the very challenges, rigidity, donor-centricity, and disconnection from community realities, that the context section identified as central obstacles.

4.3 Key features for an effective digital tool

Assessing the effectiveness of digital tools in peacebuilding requires more than simply listing available features; it demands a careful and critical analysis of how these tools perform in the realities of locally led initiatives. Several dimensions need to be considered to ensure that digital solutions genuinely strengthen M&E rather than add new burdens.⁶¹

One of the most important considerations is functionality. Ideally, a tool would do more than just collect information, it would support the full cycle of data gathering, analysis, and reporting in ways that are meaningful for peacebuilding contexts. This includes the capacity to handle both quantitative and qualitative data, as well as to incorporate different kinds of markers. Without this breadth of functionality, tools could risk oversimplifying or misrepresenting complex realities.⁶²

Usability is equally critical. Interfaces must be intuitive, instructions clear, and options available in multiple languages to reflect the diversity of users. The easier a tool is to learn and use, the more likely

61 Camilli, E. (2024). Integrating Technology and the Human Dimension in Peacebuilding. European Institute of Peace.

62 Mercy Corps & Dimagi (2022). Building a Digital Ecosystem for M&E at Scale: A Practical Guide.

it will become a sustainable part of practice.⁶³

Accessibility extends beyond usability, focusing on the ability of peacebuilders to actually obtain and operate the tools. Affordable pricing, offline functionality, and low technical requirements are therefore essential if tools are to be widely adopted and maintained in the field.

Equally pressing are concerns about data security and privacy. Effective tools must comply with data protection regulations, safeguard anonymity, and provide robust security measures to prevent unauthorized access or misuse. Security concerns were also highlighted in online survey responses as one of the key challenges.

Finally, scalability and interoperability determine whether tools can grow and adapt alongside peacebuilding efforts. A solution that works well in one small project may falter when applied across multiple regions or organizations. Effective digital tools must therefore integrate smoothly with existing systems and demonstrate flexibility to meet the increasing demands of larger initiatives.

Taken together, these considerations—functionality, usability, accessibility, security, and scalability—form the foundation for evaluating digital tools in peacebuilding. By analysing these factors, practitioners can better identify which tools are fit for purpose, where gaps remain, and how future innovations might bridge those gaps in ways that truly serve local needs.

63 Brooke, J. (1996). SUS: A “Quick and Dirty” Usability Scale. In P.W. Jordan et al. (Eds.), *Usability Evaluation in Industry*.

5. Key conclusions and recommendations for initial design of the digital tool

The survey, co-creation workshop, and desk review confirm a clear and growing appetite among local peacebuilders for digital MEL tools. These tools move beyond data extraction and instead facilitate dialogue, reflection, and trust-building among local peacebuilders and their partners as well as in communities⁶⁴

Findings show that digital solutions strengthen peacebuilding M&E/MEL only when they are co-designed, context-sensitive, and technically accessible. The following recommendations summarize the essential design principles and development steps needed to build a tool that genuinely supports locally led monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

To start with, developing digital tools for peacebuilding MEL requires equitable, trust-based collaboration. Adapting the Peace Direct’s principles for equitable partnerships,⁶⁵ the following aspects should be emphasized when engaging in collaboration in digital tool development:

- 1. Local Ownership and Co-Creation:** Digital tools must be designed with and by local actors—not for them. Local organizations and community members must be involved throughout all stages, from needs assessment to prototype testing. Co-creation fosters relevance, usability, and legitimacy.
- 2. Trust, Transparency and Open Communication:** Building trust is essential when introducing digital solutions, especially in sensitive peacebuilding contexts. Transparent processes around data use, privacy, and decision-making help ensure that digital tools are not perceived as extractive or externally imposed. Moreover, clear, respectful and continuous communication is vital—listening actively to local actors, sharing information openly, and ensuring that all voices are heard and valued.
- 3. Mutual Learning and Respect:** External actors must recognize and value local knowledge systems. Partnerships should be reciprocal, where each party brings value and is treated with dignity. Humility allows space for learning and transformation
- 4. Long-Term Commitment:** Developing and sustaining digital tools requires long-term engagement—not short-term project cycles. This includes ongoing support, capacity strengthening, and iterative refinement based on feedback from local users.

The **key design principle of digital solution is that it addresses locally defined and culturally relevant ways of measurement.** The digital solution must allow users to define what “peace,” “success,” and “impact” mean in their own contexts. It should enable flexible indicator frameworks—including qualitative markers such as stories, testimonies, and community-generated visuals—to ensure cultural legitimacy and ownership of evidence.

To be effective in locally led peacebuilding, a digital MEL tool must combine **functionality, inclusivity, and sustainability.**

64 Further detail on the co-creation workshop, including group-specific findings and proposed solution ideas, can be found in Annex 2

65 Peace Direct (2023), Transforming Partnerships in International Cooperation: A practical resource for civil society, donors, INGOs and intermediaries.

Thus, the design should integrate the following technical aspects:

- 1. Simplicity and Intuitive Use:** Interfaces should be easy to navigate with minimal training. Clear language, visual cues, and concise instructions encourage adoption among users with differing levels of digital literacy.
- 2. Flexibility and Adaptability:** Digital tools should accommodate the dynamic nature of peacebuilding work. Rigid systems risk becoming obsolete or burdensome.
- 3. Accessibility and Offline Functionality:** Because many peacebuilders operate in low-connectivity settings, the system must work offline and synchronise when a connection is restored. Low-bandwidth design, multilingual interfaces, and affordability are critical for equitable use.
- 4. Multimedia and Mixed-Data Capability:** The tool should integrate quantitative and qualitative inputs - text, audio, photos, short videos - to support participatory storytelling and recognise diverse forms of evidence.
- 5. Security and Ethical Data Management:** In fragile environments, data protection is paramount. The tool should comply with relevant privacy standards, encrypt data in transit and at rest, and include anonymity safeguards to protect vulnerable participants. Digital solutions must be ethically grounded, inclusive, and accessible. This includes addressing digital divides, ensuring usability across different literacy levels and languages, and avoiding technologies that reinforce existing power imbalances.
- 6. Multi-Stakeholder Dashboards and Communication:** Outputs should be adaptable to different audiences - community summaries, practitioner dashboards, donor reports - so that data supports accountability to both local actors and funders.
- 7. Scalability and Interoperability:** The solution must grow across projects and organisations without loss of performance. It should integrate with existing systems (e.g., KoboToolbox, Excel, Power BI) to ensure continuity and avoid duplication.

Moreover, the design should consider in advance sustainability and capacity strengthening. Long-term success depends on ongoing maintenance, training, and local management. The design should empower local partners to update and govern the system independently, reducing reliance on external developers. This means investing not only in technology itself but also in the human and institutional capacity to use and adapt it in diverse and fragile environments.

Taken together, these findings point to a convergence of priorities: locally defined ways to measure progress, adaptive and real-time frameworks, inclusion of lived experiences, offline and accessible design, and accountability that serves communities as much as donors.

Following the partnership-based approach, below are the key stages of development and implementation of digital tools to support MEL in locally led peacebuilding:

- 1. Needs Assessment:** A thorough needs assessment should be conducted to gather input from local peacebuilders and MEL experts to ensure the solution meets their particular MEL requirements. Consultations must include diverse local actors, particularly marginalized groups to guarantee inclusivity and responsiveness.
- 2. Prototype Development:** An initial prototype should be co-designed and tested with local users, enabling continuous feedback and refinement. This iterative process ensures that functionality and usability align with the realities of different contexts.
- 3. Pilot Implementation:** The prototype should be piloted in selected contexts to assess feasibility and effectiveness. Careful monitoring and evaluation during this phase will highlight both strengths and challenges, guiding further adaptation.
- 4. Scaling Up:** Lessons from the pilot should inform a strategy for scaling up, enabling wider use across multiple regions and stakeholder groups. This includes dissemination, training, and ongoing support mechanisms.
- 5. Capacity Strengthening:** Training and technical support for local peacebuilders are essential. This should cover data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as practical guidance for using the tool effectively in low-resource and/or high-risk settings.
- 6. Sustainability Planning:** Long-term sustainability requires dedicated funding, ongoing maintenance, and local capacity to manage updates and technical support. Partnerships with relevant organisations can further strengthen durability and ensure ownership remains with local actors.

By combining a participatory development process with these core design features, the digital solution will not only address structural challenges in peacebuilding MEL but also enhance local ownership, enable real-time learning, and foster balanced accountability between communities and donors. Ultimately, this approach ensures that the digital solution contributes to both the sustainability of local initiatives and the broader transformation of peacebuilding practice.

6. Conclusion

This report has explored the evolving landscape of monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) in locally led peacebuilding, with a particular focus on decolonizing practices and integrating ethical digital solutions. Through a co-development process involving literature review, survey, and a co-creation workshop, the project has surfaced critical insights into the structural and methodological challenges faced by local peacebuilders.

The findings underscore a pressing need to shift from compliance-driven, externally defined MEL frameworks toward participatory, adaptive, and contextually grounded approaches. Local actors must be recognized not only as implementers but as co-creators of knowledge and evaluative practices. This requires reimagining MEL systems to prioritize learning, long-term engagement, and recognizing locally defined meanings of terms such as peace, success and impact.

Digital tools offer promising opportunities to support this transformation. They can help streamline data collection, facilitate real-time learning, and enhance communication across stakeholders. However, their design and implementation must be rooted in the lived realities and needs of local peacebuilders. Ethical and inclusive digital solutions, co-created with local actors, can help, for example, reduce the burden of reporting and improve access to communities. Looking beyond written reporting can elevate diverse forms of evidence, including storytelling, visual media, and embodied knowledge. Still, we are mindful that the rather technical solutions alone are not solving the system-level problem we face in peacebuilding MEL. Despite some progress and already existing recognition that current MEL practices in peacebuilding must change, there is still much to achieve. Yet, we believe that by increasing visibility, providing stimulus and food for thought, and advocating for alternative approaches, we can contribute meaningfully to this transformation.

We hope that through this report we succeed in motivating and mobilizing support for the needed system-level change—shifting power within the international peacebuilding ecosystem and affirming the central role of local peacebuilders as leaders, decision-makers, and knowledge holders.

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Annexes:

Annex 1.

Survey questions and summaries of multiple-choice responses

Survey Questions: Results and digital tools in locally led peacebuilding

This survey has two goals:

1. To gather insights on the needs and challenges of MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning) in locally led peacebuilding—initiatives led by local actors, such as civil society groups, religious leaders, social movements, and communities, to foster sustainable peace.
2. To explore the role, benefits, and challenges of digital tools in MEL for locally led peacebuilding.

The survey is anonymous, with no traceable responses. It includes multiple-choice and open-ended questions, and we encourage you to share your experiences.

Thank you for your time and valuable input!

When you submit this form, it will not automatically collect your details like name and email address unless you provide it yourself.

Background Information

1. Your Role (Select one)

- Local peacebuilder
- International peacebuilding practitioner
- Donor

2. Gender

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Do not want to answer

Understanding the needs and challenges of MEL and measuring progress and results in locally led peacebuilding

3. What challenges do you face in relation to MEL and measuring progress and results in locally led peacebuilding? Please, look at the different propositions and answer according to your opinion (“Strongly agree—Somewhat agree—Neither agree nor disagree—Somewhat disagree—Strongly disagree”).

- High effort and time requirements
- MEL practices, standards, and requirements are set by donors from the Global North
- Limited technical skills/resources
- Focus on donor (upward) accountability over community (downward) accountability
- Linear program logic that takes away curiosity and does not allow for emergence of unexpected events, outcomes, or learnings.
- Designing MEL systems that can adapt to dynamic and unpredictable environments and changing circumstances.
- Inflexible indicators that limit learning and adaptation
- Lack of participatory approaches
- Difficulty in collecting reliable data in conflict/unstable situations due to security concerns, logistical issues and limited access
- Emphasis on quantitative over qualitative insights
- Gathering data from diverse sources and capturing diverse perspectives
- Maintaining transparency and accountability when dealing with sensitive information
- Creating a culture that embraces learning from failures
- Balancing the need for frequent, comprehensive and detailed reports with the desire to minimize the time and effort
- Data collection, including the limited access to technology and digital tools

4. Please, elaborate more on the challenges related to MEL and measuring progress and results in locally led peacebuilding? (optional open question)

5. What are the most important needs to improve MEL and measuring progress and results in locally led peacebuilding? Look at the different propositions and answer according to your opinion (“Strongly agree—Somewhat agree—Neither agree nor disagree—Somewhat disagree—Strongly disagree”).

- Recognition and respect of local knowledge systems
- More local influence on MEL requirements, standards and their development
- Ensuring that definitions (such as peace, success, results, impact) are contextualized within local realities

- More participatory, collaborative and inclusive evaluation methods that involve local actors and communities in all stages of MEL
- Greater adaptivity and flexibility in monitoring and evaluation methods and frameworks to respond to the changing dynamics of conflict and peace
- Rooting evaluations in the lived experiences and practices of local communities, rather than externally imposed metrics and indicators
- Recognizing and incorporating tacit or “quiet” knowledge, which is often non-verbal and learned through practice and experience.
- Better alignment of indicators with local realities
- Ensuring that analysis and findings are shared with and validated by local communities.
- Improved access to digital tools and technology
- Long-term commitment and funding to sustaining MEL practices
- Valuing more the process of learning, versus knowledge products such as reports or briefs

6. Please, elaborate more on the needs to improve MEL and measuring progress and results in locally led peacebuilding? (optional open question)

7. Do you have any examples of effective MEL approaches or means which help better measure results and progress in locally led peacebuilding? (Open answer)

Digital tools in locally led MEL and peacebuilding

8. What digital tools (if any) do you currently use for MEL in locally led peacebuilding? (Open answer)

9. Where do you see the most value in using digital tools for MEL? (Select all that apply)

- Data collection and management
- Data analysis and visualization
- Monitoring and reporting
- Community engagement
- Learning and capacity development
- Trend analysis and early warning systems
- Ensuring transparency and local accountability
- Other (please specify, open question)

10. What challenges, if any, do you face with digital tools in MEL? (Open answer)

11. What additional tools (digital or non-digital) would you find useful for MEL in locally led peacebuilding? (Open answer)

12. How would you describe your internet access?

- Reliable and fast
- Intermittent or slow
- Limited or unavailable

Final thoughts

13. What else would you like to share about MEL and measuring progress and results in locally led peacebuilding? (Open answer)

Summary of multiple-choice answers in the survey

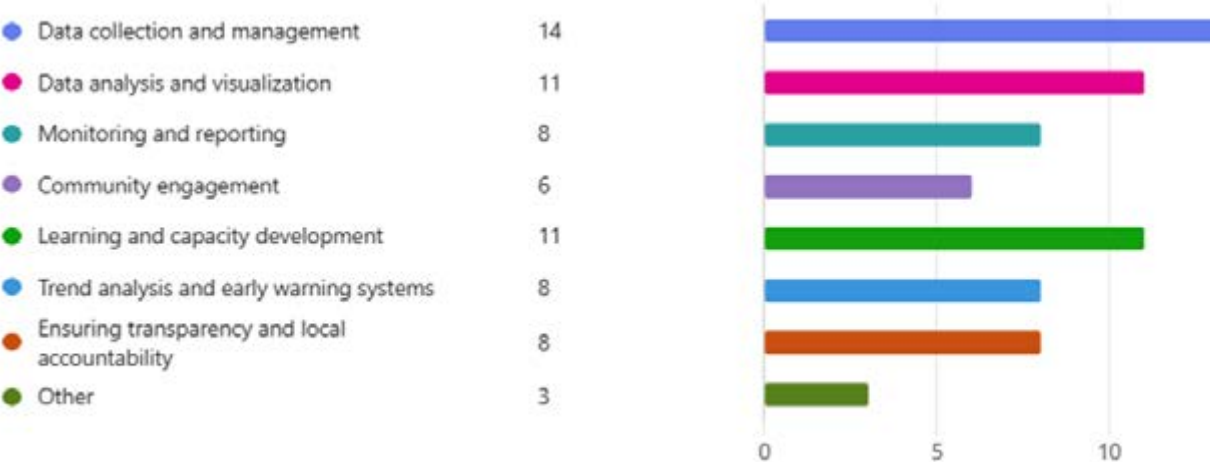
Challenges in relation to MEL and measuring progress and results in locally led peacebuilding?



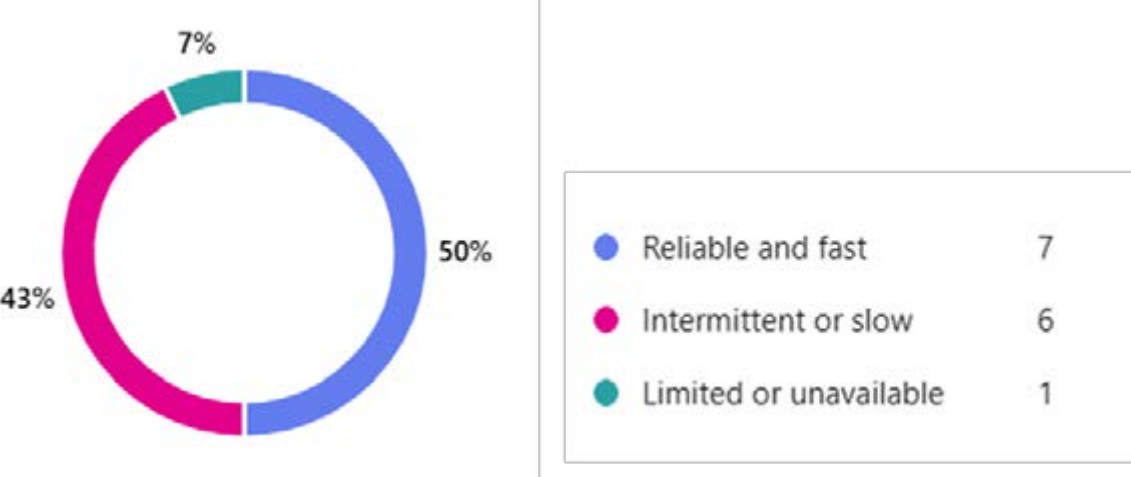
The most important needs to improve MEL and measuring progress and results in locally led peacebuilding?



Where do you see the most value in using digital tools?



How would you describe your internet access?



**Annex 2.
Design and analysis of the co-creation workshop**

**Design and agenda of the co-creation workshop 10.4 at 15:30-18:00 hrs
(Helsinki time)**

Purpose and objective of the co-creation workshop:

The co-creation workshop collects inputs from local peacebuilders and necessary information needed for an initial concept for a digital solution to support monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) and to measure and communicate results in locally led peacebuilding. The workshop will focus on:

1. Confirming the key needs and challenges of local peacebuilders when it comes to MEL and to measuring and communicating results in locally led peacebuilding. Prioritizing the needs and sharing examples of effective MEL approaches or means which help better measure results and progress in locally led peacebuilding?
2. Ideating digital solutions based on the key needs of local peacebuilders concerning MEL and measuring and communicating results in locally led peacebuilding

Workshop Agenda

15:30-15:45 Welcome and Introduction

- Purpose and objectives of the workshop

15:45-16:00 Setting the context 1: challenges and needs of MEL in locally led peacebuilding

- **Survey results and initial insights on needs and challenges:** Sharing key findings on challenges and needs as well as examples of effective MEL approaches or means which help better measure results and progress in locally led peacebuilding

16:00-16:30 Co-Creation Session 1: Confirming and prioritization key needs of MEL in locally led peacebuilding and (sharing examples of solutions to enhance MEL in locally led peacebuilding)

- Purpose of the session: Chance to discuss and elaborate about the needs and those who haven't replied to the survey can also add what they find as key needs. Can add also new needs.

Q1: *What are the key needs of MEL in locally led peacebuilding?*

Q2: *What are those identified key needs that could be addressed through digital solutions?*

16:30-16:45 Back in the main session: Report Back: Highlighting 1-3 key needs emerging that could be addressed through a digital solution

16:45-17:00 Setting the context 2: Sharing the survey results on digital tools

17:00-17:30 Co-Creation Session 2: Ideating Digital Solutions for identified needs

17:30—17:45 Back in the main session: Report Back, 5 mins per group

17:45-18:00 Next Steps and Closing (15 minutes)

Analysis of the results from the co-creation workshop

The three groups in the co-creation workshop deepened and contextualised the findings of the survey. Each group brought a different emphasis. Group 1 focused on digital utility, group 2 on the capabilities to transform the MEL system and Group 3 highlighted the value of local stories.

Group 1 concentrated on technical and operational needs, such as:

- Secure data storage and transmission;
- Time-saving analytics and simplified dashboards;
- The need for real-time interpretation of incoming data for decision-making;
- Tools that can integrate data from multiple geographic areas while protecting community inputs.

Group 2 prioritised values and principles, calling for:

- A rethinking of MEL frameworks to better reflect shared power and ownership;
- Locally co-created indicators of peace and success;
- The centrality of lived experience as legitimate data;
- Overcoming digital barriers (language, access, literacy) through inclusive design.

Group 3 placed emphasis on communication and engagement, specifically:

- Tools that support multimedia storytelling, especially for audiences with limited literacy;
- The ability to differentiate outputs for different audiences, e.g., simple community updates vs. detailed donor reports;
- Mechanisms to allow feedback loops, where communities not only contribute but also learn from MEL findings;
- Inclusion of visual and oral formats (e.g., photos, recordings) as valid forms of evidence.

Key themes across all three groups

Several cross-cutting themes emerge clearly from the feedback of all three groups:

Participatory and locally owned MEL

- All groups emphasized local ownership of the MEL process. This includes defining indicators, co-creating definitions (e.g., peace, success), and ensuring the community is not just consulted but actively involved in design, data collection, interpretation, and learning.
- Group 2 and Group 3 particularly highlighted the need to redefine MEL so that it is meaningful and useful to local actors, not just donors.

Real-time and adaptive learning

- All three groups articulated the need for real-time sharing, updating, and reflection of data and insights.
- The concept of a “living MEL framework” that evolves with changing context and captures emerging learning was especially pronounced in Group 2 but aligned with Group 1’s and Group 3’s concerns about timely data translation and access.

Accessible, secure, and context-sensitive technology

- Accessibility (despite limited devices, skills, or connectivity) and offline capability was mentioned by all groups.
- There is a recurring need for secure, encrypted systems (Group 1 and Group 3), with sensitivity to risks in conflict-affected areas.
- Group 3 adds further nuance with the granular classification of stakeholders and ensuring data is accessible in varied forms suited to different users.

Integration of qualitative and non-traditional data

- Across all groups, there’s a call to value and integrate qualitative data, like testimonies, stories, songs, and images.
- Group 3 and Group 1 speak directly to combining visuals, audio, and quantitative data, making sense of community-generated content in digital platforms.

Simplification and timesaving

- The need for simplified, user-friendly, tools that save time and aid decision-making was common in all groups.
- This includes dashboards, analysis tools, and easy-to-use communication or storytelling tools (Group 1 and Group 2), and simplified interfaces for older or less tech-savvy users (Group 3).

Common MEL needs and solutions across all three groups

Common Needs

Need	Group(s)
Real-time sharing and learning	1, 2, 3
Local ownership and participation in MEL	1, 2, 3
Balancing qualitative and quantitative data	1, 2, 3 (strongest in 3)
Data security and sensitivity	1, 3 (implied in 2)
Overcoming tech access/digital literacy limitations	2, 3 (implied in 1 via universal access)

Common solution ideas

Solution	Group(s)
Offline-capable tools and mobile-friendly solutions In situ context analysis	1, 2, 3 1,2,3
Storytelling or visual-based data sharing platforms	1, 2, 3
Dashboards and analysis tools tailored for multiple audiences	1, 2, 3
Secure, encrypted platforms for storing and sharing sensitive data	1, 3
Community-driven frameworks and digital input portals	2, 3 (implied in 1 via joint learning and reflection needs)

Specific ideas derived for each group

Group	Key MEL needs in locally led peacebuilding	Ideas for digital solutions
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data storage and management • Data analysis for strategic program adaptation • Time-saving mechanisms for data analysis • Dedicated time and support for data reflection • Real-time data translation and interpretation • Cross-sharing of learnings among partners in real time • Real-time data processing, access, and management • Encrypted data systems • Coordinated data analysis and management across geographically dispersed partners • Mechanisms for joint learning among local peacebuilders • Universal data access regardless of location • Use of accessible online tools (e.g., WhatsApp) for data sharing • Tools that can interpret or analyze data insights • Systems for feedback collection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital systems for data visualisation and integration of multiple data sources • Real-time storytelling capabilities (e.g., integrating vocal content and transcriptions) • Tools addressing both donor reporting needs and local learning needs • Disaggregated data entry with embedded quality control mechanisms • Analytical tools for comparison across communities and time periods • Dashboards or platforms for impact measurement and progress tracking • Tools that enable quick and accessible data analysis for timely decision-making • Systems for ongoing situation analysis, with real-time updates on local contexts • Conflict-sensitive tools that help identify threats and evaluate responses
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextualized and locally co-created definitions of key concepts (e.g., peace, success) • Alignment on terminology, meaning, and perceived value • Inclusive and participatory MEL, including direct community involvement • Shared ownership and power in MEL design, implementation, and follow-up • Real-time sharing of information and findings • A living MEL framework that evolves with emerging contexts • Centering lived experiences as valid, reportable data • Systems that emphasize local contextual knowledge and conflict sensitivity • MEL frameworks that serve both donors and local peacebuilders • Rethinking and potentially renaming MEL to reflect a paradigm shift • Overcoming tech barriers like low digital literacy, lack of devices, and internet access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication tools to reduce geographic barriers: use of phones, online meetings to avoid travel, offline-compatible solutions • Ethical digital enhancement of traditional participation practices, especially those involving storytelling, singing, drawing, etc. • Capability to digitally transform local expression forms (photos of drawings, audio of songs, etc.) • Scheduling tools and real-time updates, including recorded meetings for asynchronous access • Tools that facilitate data accessibility, sovereignty, and local governance • Platforms for shared input on MEL frameworks, enabling real-time contributions from local actors • Mechanisms for annual MEL reflection with local contributors • Use of anonymous input channels to capture sensitive insights • Real-time visuals (with less text, more imagery) shared via pre-identified digital platforms and group representatives
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capturing testimonies and perceptions of change • Community involvement in identifying and prioritizing needs • Need for streamlined data recording methods • Balancing qualitative and quantitative data • Effective communication and storage of learning and data • Tools to manage numerical data alongside photos and videos • Creative forms of data representation (e.g., “photos with their eyes”) linked to indicators • Local definition, adoption, and ownership of indicators • Systematic recording of pre • and post-project experiences • Emphasis on communicating success stories to diverse stakeholders • Tailored return of information to communities in accessible formats • Recognition of barriers to participation (e.g., age, gender, digital literacy) and need for alternative data collection modes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tools that function offline or with low connectivity, enabling upload of videos, audios, and photos when reconnected • Systems designed with data security and sensitivity in mind to prevent leaks and protect community inputs • Tools that classify stakeholders (donors, direct/indirect beneficiaries, general public) and tailor content accordingly • Platforms offering custom views of success and impact for different audiences (e.g., narrative for community, metrics for donors) • Context analysis and impact • Ability to show “before and after” stories, linking indicators to visual or experiential evidence • Phone-based delivery of data and stories, especially for populations less familiar with dashboards • Interfaces that simplify data access and understanding for varied levels of digital literacy • Enable longitudinal data collection across project phases • Recipient-specific content channels (e.g., SMS for elders, apps for youth) • Support for non-visual data submission methods (e.g., voice, dramatization) • Integrated feedback-return functionality to ensure community learns from the data collected