Best Practices of Child-Led Monitoring and Evaluation in the Development Aid Sector

MAGDALENE NICKEL [ID]

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University of Applied Sciences
Windesheim

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify best practices in child-led monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in the development aid sector. Children's views are gradually recognised as relevant in research, including the use of child-led research methods for M&E of programs and services in the development aid sector. There are three relevant components to assessing best practices of child-led M&E: the application of various methods, the ethical dimension, and the role of adults. Fourteen expert interviews and desk research were conducted to identify best practices. The findings reveal that while traditional methods require additional skills training and guidance by adults, participatory methods give children increased ownership of the process through various ways of expression. These, therefore, are suitable child-led research methods. Furthermore, the research reveals comprehensive methods to account for the ethical dimension of child-led M&E, such as the Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation, topics such as informed consent, payment and compensation, and the children's sense of ownership across the M&E cycle. The results validate various roles that adults play in child-led M&E. These roles include providing additional insights, fostering mutual support between children and adults through the expression of children's perspectives, and contributing to informed decision-making by incorporating the voices of children in programming in the development aid sector.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Magdalene Nickel

Windesheim Honours College, Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, NL

magdalene98@hotmail.de

INTRODUCTION

According to World Vision (2017), child-led research is a relevant topic for organisations in the development aid sector. It intersects with global issues related to children's rights and the Sustainable Development Goals. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that the voice of the most vulnerable in society should be equally heard and given consideration (Unicef, 1989). Studying child-led monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is a relevant topic of research as it can stimulate child-led accountability within organizations in the development aid sector (World Vision, 2017). Child-led M&E applies child-led research principles and grants children the opportunity to share their experiences with programs and services that concern them.

Various development aid organisations direct their programs for children and recognise children's capacity to contribute to M&E (World Vision, 2017; Save the Children, 2019; Unicef 2021). The reason being that they can better adapt their programs to children's needs. Therefore, development aid organisations would benefit from more knowledge of best practices in child-led M&E (World Vision, 2017).

BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION AND ORIGIN OF CHILD-LED RESEARCH

Kellett (2010) describes child-led research as having two components. The first is the central and extensive involvement of children and young people of various ages throughout the research, while the second is the supportive but not dominant involvement of adults. Work by World Vision (2017) indicates that children who receive training can conduct research without adult guidance. In child-led research, children can claim ownership of the research results (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). The use of terminologies such as co-design and co-production in this research field reflects the participatory and collaborative nature of child-led research (Kellett, 2010). Child-led research has a far-reaching scope and is applied in diverse contexts such as in academia, educational institutions, and NGOs (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019).

Child-led research was founded based on various scientific discoveries. Studies by child psychologists such as Piaget acknowledged that children are different from adults and perceive the world differently (Jensen & Arnett, 2018). This school of thought endorses the idea that children can reflect upon and express their view of the world by themselves and contribute to knowledge-making. The introduction of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was a key milestone that underlined the right of the child to information and participation in decision-making (Unicef, 1989). This paradigm shift led to the understanding that children are consumers of public and private goods and services and supported the emergence of participation and emancipation theories which levelled the way for the emergence of child-led research (Kellett, 2010).

CHILDREN'S CAPABILITY TO DO RESEARCH

Whether or not children are suitable researchers is an ongoing debate. According to Woodhead and Faulkner (2000), children go through different development stages which are connected to different skills that build on each other. Therefore, children in their early development stages might not yet be suitable researchers. In contrast, Solberg (1996) suggests in his early work that social experience, rather than age, is a suitable marker for maturity. Furthermore, Solberg concludes that even though children's experiences differ from adults', they are no less relevant or meaningful. Kellett (2010) asserts that children can provide valuable insider perspectives into their own lives and thereby provide new perspectives which lead to higher quality data on children's lives. Work by Michail and Kellett (2015) added that children can be researchers if the definition of research does not solely rely on the need for validity and reliability, but encompasses the need for participation, societal change, and engagement.

THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF CHILD-LED RESEARCH

Research ethics demand legal limitations, such as the necessity for consent from legal guardians (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019) and the children themselves (Skelton, 2008) to be considered.

Other aspects to be mindful of include respect for other responsibilities that children carry, and local traditions, knowledge, and customs. This underscores the need for organisations to develop ethical guidelines on research involving children. Moreover, procedures that consider the individual needs of the children and the context of their activities must be put in place. Power imbalances that can arise from the involvement of adults as researchers should also be considered (Morrow & Richards, 1996) by employing experienced experts in child-led research and carefully applying methods that allow children to negotiate their level of participation (Carter & Ford, 2013).

Various authors emphasize that children should be involved in the analysis and use of their data (Carter & Ford, 2013; Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). Furthermore, researchers must consider the potential impact that the methods may have on children and their surroundings (Bird et al., 2020), confidentiality breaches and the debatable use of compensation. Guidelines such as the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct serve as widely accepted and applied ethical guidelines for involving children (American Psychological Association, 2017).

RESEARCH METHODS FOR CHILD-LED RESEARCH

Carter and Ford (2013) and Greenfield (2011) state that the research designs should be carefully planned and must be adaptable to the interests and needs of the children involved. Aspects to consider include language, pacing, and simplicity of explanations. Additionally, the research design should account for participants' heterogeneity in age and cultural backgrounds (Carter & Ford, 2013; Green 2012). This requires a good understanding of the group being researched and of the limitations of various research techniques (Coyne et al., 2021). Green (2012) calls for the use of multiple research methods that children can tailor to their needs. Carter and Ford (2013) add another dimension to the discussion by suggesting that the design should be carefully and thoroughly thought through and planned because major differences, such as the amount or kind of papers, pens, and other handcraft materials provided can influence the results obtained by the research.

There are ongoing discussions among researchers regarding the most suitable methods for child-led research (Punch, 2002). The aim is to find engaging and enjoyable methods for children while making sure the methods meet reliability and validity standards.

The use of traditional methods

Some evidence recommends the use of traditional research methods such as surveys, questionnaires, audits, and interviews in child-led research. For example, Green (2012) adds more flexibility to traditional research designs by using open-ended questions in interviews with children. The author concludes that this method guides the child through the research while at the same time incorporating the individual needs and input of the child. Also, setting no time limits for the interview activities allows the child to have more control over the interview process. Merriman and Guerin (2006) experimented with questionnaires and suggest that while they are easy and convenient to use for data collection and analysis purposes, they might fall short in several aspects. Firstly, closed questions limit the input children can give while open-ended questions are more like interviews that consume a lot of time. Secondly, the written form of questionnaires prevents the participation of children who are not advanced in reading and writing. Thirdly, questionnaires do not allow much flexibility for the researcher and the child during the research. The findings of Clark (2001) add to this by suggesting that traditional methods might be suitable for recording information but often do not capture the unconscious viewpoints of children.

Drawing methods and the Draw Write and Tell method

In a study involving young children in a classroom setting, Brooks (2009) concludes that drawing methods are suitable for children. Drawing methods can be beneficial for children with low literacy (Merriman & Guerin, 2006). Drawing also requires fewer personnel or materials and can be used in contexts with limited or scarce financial resources (Driessnack, 2005). Brooks (2009) found that drawings can both support and capture the development of cognitive growth and scientific thinking in children. The former can be achieved by assisting

the child to visualize and understand experiences as well as reflect upon relationships. The latter is achieved by applying the drawing method across time and context to capture changes in the development of the child over time. For such longitudinal studies, drawings should be stored so that they can be reviewed over time (Darling-McQuistan, 2017). Many researchers found that collective drawing activities can both enrich the research experience and the outcomes (Darling-McQuistan, 2017; Coates, 2002). The main weakness of drawings is the potential misinterpretation of the data. According to Coates (2002) recording the self-talk of children while drawing can help to form a more holistic picture of the children's experiences. The evaluation of self-talk can provide an immediate interpretation of the drawing by the child and mitigate subjectivity in the interpretation by adults.

The draw, write and tell method combines all three aspects in one research method, creating a combination of qualitative and quantitative coding (Merriman & Guerin, 2006). This method gives space for the child to interpret the drawing and strengthens the inter-rater reliability. The method was developed in the field of health and well-being research and consists of three parts (Angell, Alexander & Hunt, 2015). First, the child draws a picture, then, the child writes something about the picture. Finally, the child tells a story about the picture.

Other art-based methods

Additional art-based methods are applied in child-led research such as drama, photography, collage (Carter & Ford, 2014), storytelling and vignettes (Carter & Ford, 2014), photos (Einarsdottir, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005), diaries (Fargas-Malet et al, 2010), and puppet play (Green, 2012). Several researchers have combined art-based methods with other methods (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2008). In recent years, art-based methods have gained increasing popularity as they capture the analytical and cognitive abilities of children (Carter & Ford, 2014) and provide playful elements which increase the interest and attention of children (Cummings, 2021; Carter & Ford, 2014). Other aspects that explain the wide application of art-based methods are their application across cultures because they do not rely on language, they can be used with children who have disabilities (Merriman & Guerin, 2006) and they can be used with introverted children (Greenfield, 2011).

However, art-based research can only provide partial insights into children's lives (Coyne et al., 2021). Darling-McQuistan (2017) monitored and evaluated teaching practices and found that art-based research does not provide sufficient input for M&E on how to change or adapt practices or services. This is because such methods can only provide images of the current state of projects or visions of the future. However, they fail to provide an analysis of existing problems and plans of action to achieve desired improvements. Nevertheless, they can be a helpful method for stimulating thoughts and reflection (Darling-McQuistan, 2017).

The Mosaic approach

According to Barker and Weller (2003), a multi-method approach is necessary for child-led M&E of programs. Qualitative methods provide a holistic picture of the child's experiences while quantitative methods gather large-scale information. The Mosaic approach has its origin in participatory appraisal methods and pedagogical documentation (Clark, 2005). It combines quantitative, qualitative, and participatory methods (Clark, 2005; Clark & Statham, 2005). The Mosaic approach encourages reflection on meanings among all participants and takes account of sensible interpretation of the data (Clark, 2005; Clark, 2001). The method can be adapted to different settings and contexts and focuses on knowledge children gain through real-life experiences (Clark, 2005; Clark, 2001). The tool can also be used in practice and training, as well as for evaluation purposes (Clark, 2005; Clark, 2001).

Findings by Greenfield (2011), Baird (2013), and Samuelsson (2004) indicate that the use of different methods is valuable but adds to the level of complexity of the research. Findings by Baird (2013) further suggest that the Mosaic approach requires a lot of time. Greenfield (2011) acknowledges this but concludes that this slow knowledge will bring "more rewarding and surprising results" (Clark, 2010, p. 112).

Participatory action research

Participatory action research is a relatively new method and integrates participatory elements throughout the research design. It combines qualitative and quantitative methods and integrates collective action cycles into the methodology (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). Findings by Shamrova and Cummings (2017) indicate that the outcomes of participatory action research can be classified into categories. Firstly, the individual child, for example, can experience increased skills in research and knowledge of the research topic and increased sensitivity to social issues. Children can also gain knowledge of participatory methods and processes (Dennis et al., 2009). Secondly, at the organizational and community level, researchers have observed a shift towards more sensitivity to the needs of children during the designing of programs. Children participate in the decision-making process as their views are seen as equally important to adults (Bautista et al., 2013), and better data can be used to improve the programs of the organisation (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). The main challenges of participatory action research are how to include young children, how to ensure that children are participating consistently throughout the research, and how to adapt the method to various cultural contexts (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

Diamond ranking

The Diamond ranking is based on a ready-made template that allows research participants to assign priorities to items and rank them within the template (Visual Paradigm Online, n.d.). Three aspects support the application of this tool. First, it is a time and resource-efficient method as it does not put much extra workload on the researcher and does not require a lot of materials (Haapaniemi et al., 2021). Second, the tool encourages collaboration among participants and stimulates discussions, sharing of information, negotiation, and consensus formation (Visual Paradigm Online, n.d.). Third, the method can be combined with photography and written narratives to assist children in expressing their experiences (Niemi, Kumpulainen & Lipponen, 2015).

CHILD-LED RESEARCH FOR MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Several studies apply child-led research methods for the M&E of child-focused programs and services. All studies see the child as having insider knowledge that adds additional perspectives (Kellett, 2010). One of the first to apply child-led research in M&E were researchers in Educational Science. The researcher and teacher Darling-McQuistan (2017) applied art-based methods in his work with students and observed that the activities stimulated a critical reflection on teaching methods among students and colleagues. He concluded that child-led research can serve as an additional source of data for monitoring and improving teaching practices. To make effective changes, the data of children needs deeper input from adults and key decision-makers. For instance, Bessette (2008) analysed the perception of elementary and middle school students on co-teaching whereby the views of the students helped to identify areas to improve, while adults provided additional insights.

Child-led research methodologies are increasingly applied by organisations in the development aid sector for M&E purposes. It refers to the highest level of child participation and includes children in designing methods, collecting information, analysing results, and writing and disseminating M&E reports (World Vision, 2017). For example, the World Awareness for Children in Trauma Organisation developed a framework for mental health and psycho-social support for vulnerable children (Smit & Vostanis 2018). The framework is child-led, applies participatory elements and was developed to assist NGOs in measuring their impact, developing new interventions and assessing changes over time. Save the Children (2019) also conducted a child-led study that investigated children's perception of education projects in Somalia after periods of violence. Using child-friendly participatory methods, the organisation consulted children on how access to education could be improved in the programs of the organisation. Cuevas-Parra and Stephano (2020) conducted research for World Vision that explored the perception of children and young people on the COVID-19 outbreak and the organisation's COVID-19 related projects. World Vision (2017) recommends further exploration of child-led research for directing interventions, increasing accountability, and making funding available for child-led research in programming.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Children's rights paved the way for the emergence of child-led research. Many researchers increasingly recognise that children's insider knowledge of their experiences can be valuable in monitoring and improving services that concern them (Kellett, 2010). However, whether children are suitable researchers is an ongoing debate. What is acknowledged are children's skills to express themselves (Michail & Kellett, 2015). Clark and Moss (2011) created a theoretical framework that combines children's rights, skills, and knowledge. Rogers et al. (2017) developed an expanded version of this framework by including adults' views and responsibilities. Their studies reveal that adults play a crucial role in setting the necessary conditions for child-led research (Carter & Ford, 2014). The framework by Rogers et al. was developed for research in collective cultures where children highly depend on their surrounding society and adults' voices. This adds valuable insights to the experiences of children. The researchers also argue that adults and institutions play important roles in the use of children's data by emphasising children's voices on an institutional and managerial level. Their framework also incorporates the ethical dimension discussed earlier by acknowledging power imbalances (Rogers & Boyd, 2020). Furthermore, the framework supports a multimethod approach that is flexible to the needs of both children and adults.

A conceptual framework has been developed for the purpose of this research (see Figure 1) based on the expanded framework for listening to children's voices by Rogers et al. (2017). The conceptual framework summarises the three dimensions identified as relevant for assessing best practices, namely the ethical dimension, the application of various methods, and the role of adults. Valuing children's rights, skills, knowledge, and understanding are seen as necessary conditions for involving children in M&E as formulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 1989) and were therefore placed as a circle around the framework. The ethical dimension was formulated a bit broader than in the original framework of Rogers and Boyd (2020) and discusses the role of guidelines and organisational structures to support ethical aspects, such as rules for consent, confidential treatment of data, and respect for local traditions, knowledge, and customs as emphasized by Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall (2019). The framework further presents assumptions for the application of various methods, including traditional and participatory methods as identified in the literature. The conceptual framework originates from a child-led research background. It points out all relevant aspects to consider when involving children in child-led M&E, provides a structure for what to look for in the existing data, and outlines clear aspects that are relevant for the discussion of the research results by focusing on these three dimensions that have been identified as relevant for assessing best practices.
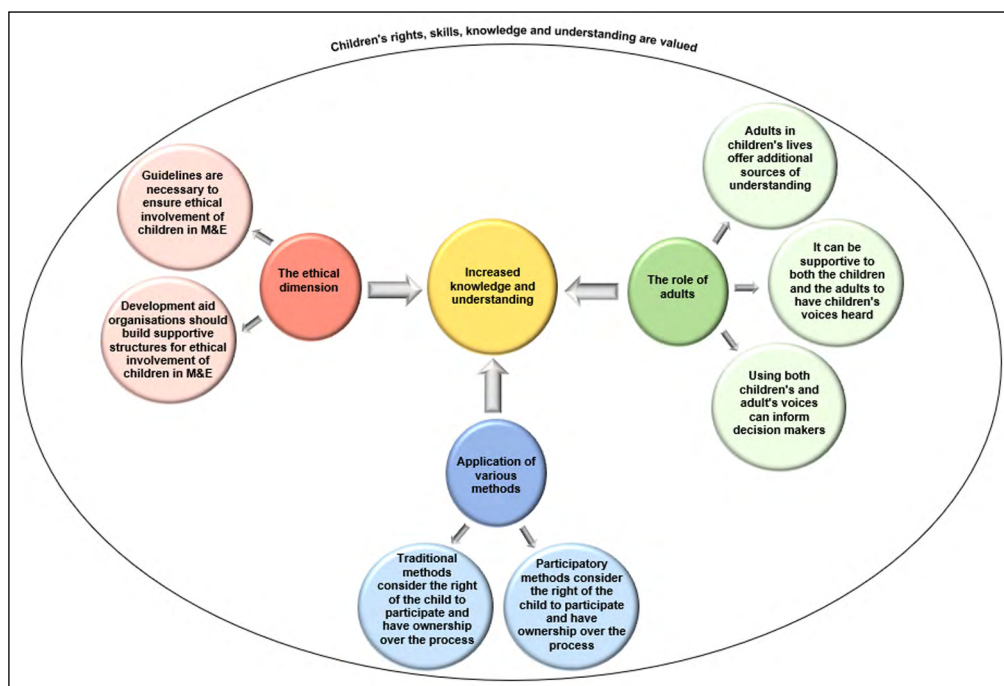

Figure 1 Conceptual framework on increased knowledge and understanding (Child-led M&E in the development aid sector). Adapted from Expanded framework for listening to children's voices (Rogers et al., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This research aims to contribute to the call of development aid organisations such as World Vision (2017) and Unicef (2021) for further exploration of best practices for child-led monitoring and evaluation in the development aid sector. It investigates different dimensions of child-led M&E in the development aid sector, namely child-led research methods used, practices to account for the ethical dimension, and the role of adults.

DATA COLLECTION

First, the researcher collected theoretical knowledge that contributed to the researcher's general understanding of the topic and to identifying theories and models in the field, as well as gaps in research. Also, the literature provided input for the conceptual framework of this study. In the next step, the researcher gathered new data to test the hypothesis outlined in the conceptual framework. All three sub-questions were answered by using the same data triangulation including desk research and semi-structured interviews.

The literature for the desk research, such as case studies, handbooks/manuals, and publications in the field of child-led M&E, was found in various academic and non-academic databases. Reference lists from key studies were used to find further information. For this study, the researcher studied 160 sources. The desk research contributed to this study in two ways. Firstly, the desk research helped to directly answer the research questions. Case studies, handbooks/manuals were collected and analysed to identify best practices of child-led M&E in the development aid sector. Secondly, the desk research helped to find participants for the research. This was done by collecting case studies and reaching out to the leading researchers of those studies. Several historical articles were included in this research to provide a historical background of the field, and to refer to guidelines that are well established in the field.

The 14 semi-structured expert interviews conducted between 10 March 2022 to 13 May 2022 added a practical perspective with the experts sharing their experiences, stories, and challenges. The interviews also helped to discuss the findings more in-depth as the researcher was able to ask follow-up questions for clarification purposes.

SAMPLING

To find participants for the interviews, non-probability sampling methods were used, including purposive and snowball sampling (Etikan and Bala, 2017). Purposive sampling of interview participants helped to investigate the topic from different angles, for example, academic, legal, managerial, and ethical. Snowball sampling added to the diffusion of knowledge and provided insights into opportunities for child-led research in the development aid sector. The following criteria were applied in searching for and selecting interview participants: a degree related to child participation or M&E and at least four years of experience in the corresponding field or a considerable experience in child-led M&E or in a position of responsibility in the field of study.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyse the interviews, a deductive, theory-based approach was taken. The codes were derived from the literature and are directly linked to the conceptual framework of this study. Additionally, emerging coding was done. After the coding process, the researcher analysed the data by looking for similarities and differences in the data. The researcher looked for connections between the codes and the three dimensions identified in the conceptual framework. The desk research was analysed using the same pre-defined codes to allow for comparability of the findings along the three dimensions of child-led M&E. After applying the codes, the researcher checked for similarities and differences in the data and compared the desk research findings with the interview findings.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The academic literature is from peer-reviewed journals and non-academic literature is from organisations and individuals who have experience in the field and publish their work up to professional standards. The researcher kept a research log (Osborne, 2016) to further increase the transferability and dependability of the research. All interview participants filled out a

consent form and were asked if they preferred to be treated anonymously. The researcher asked each participant similar questions so that the credibility of the research was tested by looking at similarities and differences in the participants' answers.

The researcher consulted peer reviewers to facilitate intersubjectivity. Participant triangulation was achieved by interviewing a variety of participants such as M&E specialists, managers, academics, activists, and consultants. Moreover, the participants varied in the size of development aid organisations they worked for, including INGOs, NGOs, foundations, and a management consulting firm. Special attention was put on the analysis of negative cases (data points within qualitative interviews that deviate from the expected or common patterns, themes, or findings) as emphasized by Bergen and Labonté (2020). The researcher used true verbatim transcription of the interviews to ensure that data were documented without changes.

The researcher paid attention to the ethical considerations of the research by asking for the consent of the participants, reframing confidential data when requested, and by offering the participants to review the report before publication. Further, the study incorporated ethical standards suggested by Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall (2019), the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2017), and the Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Child Participation (Save the Children, 2020).

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the research, divided according to the three different dimensions of child-led M&E in the development aid sector. Interview participants stated their personal opinions and do not represent the views of the organisation as a whole. They solely served as experts in the field and shared their experiences and knowledge from the rich work they have done in supporting their functions.

SUITABLE CHILD-LED RESEARCH METHODS TO USE FOR MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT AID SECTOR

This research classifies research methods as suitable for child-led M&E in the development aid sector if they give children a high degree of ownership in designing the M&E, collecting data, analysing results, and dissemination and reporting (World Vision, 2017).

Traditional methods

The research findings indicate that various traditional methods find application in M&E in the development aid sector. Based on the definition of suitability for this research, traditional methods consider the right of the child to participate by allowing children to take part in discussions and share their insights and views. Simple questions such as those in yes or no surveys can be used by child researchers. However, the research findings show some evidence that traditional methods pose challenges when it comes to giving children ownership over the M&E process. Children need certain skills, knowledge, and understanding to take full ownership of M&E activities that involve traditional methods. These include, for example, literacy skills and skills of oral expression. If children do not have these skills, they require either additional training before the M&E activities or adult guidance throughout the research process. However, the power imbalances inherent in the research process may result in decreased ownership over the M&E by the children. However, older children who have sufficiently developed these skills through training will be able to use traditional methods well in child-led M&E. Consequently, the findings partly confirm the assumption in the conceptual framework of this study which states that traditional methods consider the right of the child to participation and ownership over the process. A necessary condition is that children are either old enough to already have acquired the needed skills or receive training and guidance from adults to manage the methods. The findings indicate that development aid organisations should carefully assess the skills of children they wish to involve. If necessary, they need to develop training for children in the use of the methods.

Participatory and art-based methods

The research findings indicate a wide application of participatory methods in child-led M&E in the development aid sector. Some organisations combine traditional and participatory methods, while others entirely rely on participatory methods. Based on the definition of suitability for this research, it can be observed that participatory methods are in line with this definition. Participatory methods make use of a wide range of materials and practices, such as images and pictures, storytelling, writing, drama, mapping, scoring and ranking activities which allow children to express themselves in many ways, according to their skills and understanding. The child-friendliness of participatory methods also allows very young children to share their insights. Because of their child-friendly accessibility, participatory methods allow children to take ownership of the process. For example, children can lead the designing of activities by choosing the methods they wish to use while mapping activities allow children to make sense of data and develop their analysis and illustration of findings. Therefore, the findings confirm the assumption that participatory methods consider the right of the child to participation and ownership. The findings indicate that development aid organisations can apply participatory methods across a wide range of contexts and groups of children.

BEST PRACTICES TO ACCOUNT FOR THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF CHILD LED M&E IN THE DEVELOPMENT AID SECTOR

The ethical dimension is crucial when involving children in M&E. As explained by Participant 10, safeguarding and protection are necessary to ensure children's rights to safety, protection from harm, and meaningful participation. The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation (Save the Children 2020) was often cited as a guideline to account for the ethical dimension. However, it is necessary to analyse each context and activity to identify opportunities and challenges. In some contexts, certain principles might need additional support structures to be realised (Save the Children, 2020).

Several participants stated that they form organisational structures to adequately account for the ethical dimension. These include clearance committees (Participant 4), children's advisory groups (Participant 3), emotional support structures for the children participants of the research (Participant 6), and child-friendly spaces. Participant 3 added that "having structures […] helped [children] to have a stronger voice". Strong accountability and feedback mechanisms are also vital for the ethical participation of children. Participant 10 explains,

> closing the feedback loop has to do with trust. […] I work a lot on feedback and accountability. […] trust needs to be there since the beginning […] for all the safeguarding […] you need to have trust".

According to Smit and Vistana (2018), it is essential to build a positive and nurturing relationship with the communities as trust helps children to feel valued and safe during their participation in M&E. Unicef (2018) adds that reporting back to children is essential even if their ideas cannot be implemented. In such cases, it is important to explain to children how their views have been taken into consideration and why it was not possible to implement all of them. Further recommendations for the organisational level include: establishing practice standards (Save the Children, 2005); conducting stakeholder mapping to understand the power dynamics within the communities (Save the Children, 2013); policy checks, and guidelines for behaviour such as adult-child ratios, support options for children such as protection; safeguarding and mental support; researcher training on safeguarding and protection; and formal complaint procedures (Thompson, Cannon & Wickenden, 2020). Furthermore, organisations must conduct a comprehensive risk and harm assessment before the activities (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2021; Participant 10). They also need to devise a plan on how to mitigate harm and how to support children who experience harm. UNICEF (2021) states that distributed models of data governance can account for the ethical dimension as community members will be involved in the management and distribution of their data and have more ownership over it.

Informed consent

The International Charter for Ethical Research Involving Children defines obtaining consent as one of the main principles when involving children (Jamieson et al., 2021). Consent is ongoing

therefore it is important to check in repeatedly with children, to ensure that they understand their rights and roles, provide them with the necessary information, and get their consent to participate in each activity they are involved in. Involving children in M&E activities might require several layers of consent. These layers include, for example, the guardians of the children, key representatives of the communities in which the children live, or teachers. The interviews revealed that getting consent from the guardians is especially important when involving very young children. This is due to legal regulations, especially because parents are the ones capable of making the best decisions for their children. The desk research supports this idea but also emphasizes the need to consider the limitations and strengths of obtaining parental consent (Powell et al., 2013). Sometimes, children might be pressured to participate if their guardians want them to. This is especially the case if there are strong power relations between adults and their children. In such cases, the researcher needs to balance these limitations by sensitively observing the behaviour and verbal signals of the children.

Researchers undertake great efforts to get consent from young children. Examples include photo consent where the activities are explained to the children using pictures. Participant 8 gave examples of activities used where children indicate their consent, such as by drawing a happy face, thumbs up, a tick, using puppets, or stepping in a circle and emphasized the need for activities that allow children to 'unpack' the ethical dimension of research. Examples of such activities can include drawing the perfect researcher as a body map and providing children with logs and storage places to keep drawings safe. These activities allow children to become active agents in ethical research and to demystify research by translating ethics into practical activities and procedures for children. This underscores the importance of training participants on child rights, participation, and methodologies (ARC, n.d.).

Compensation and payment

The interview findings indicate that children are not compensated or paid for the time they spend on M&E activities in the development aid sector. This is because M&E activities are usually part of development projects that already benefit the children involved. Organisations should consider three aspects if they want to compensate or pay children (Powell, et al., 2013). First, they should ensure that the payment is not used to pressure children or their guardians. The decision to participate should be entirely voluntary and not be influenced by the payment. Secondly, the organisation should take the cultural and social norms into account as they determine if compensation or payment is appropriate. Third, the organisation needs to carefully manage the expectations of participants and guardians towards the research and communicate the reasons and the limitations of these payments. Especially in the context of poverty, the payment might not be appropriate, because the beneficiaries are especially vulnerable to exploitation, coercion, and bribery (Powell et al., 2013). In such cases, non-monetary compensation/incentives such as certificates of recognition, gifts, or vouchers might be more appropriate. Some participants share that they hand out certificates to participants instead of monetary rewards.

THE ROLE OF ADULTS IN CHILD-LED MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT AID SECTOR

Adults in children's lives offer additional sources of understanding

Only one interview participant agreed with the statement that adults in children's lives offer additional sources of understanding. This interview participant said that adults' insights are important in contexts where children might not feel free to express themselves or when monitoring and evaluating sensitive topics such as corporal punishment (Participant 4). In such cases, adults, such as staff members of development aid organisations, teachers or community leaders might be more entitled to raise discussions or call out problems.

Most interview participants did not directly comment on this statement, however, it is possible to derive some indirect answers from the data. Generally, the participants were very confident in children's skills in M&E and research in general. The observation by participants that often children were much better at analysis than adults because "they go deeper, and they realize more" (Participant 8) suggests that the insights of adults are not always necessary to increase the quality or richness of M&E data.

It can be supportive to both the children and the adults to have their voices heard

Several participants said that they found the experience of involving children in M&E activities beneficial. For example, they shared that they enjoyed the process, that children surprised them with new ideas, and that involving children would positively challenge their work.

The process itself can be an empowering experience for children. The participants have observed that children's involvement in M&E activities often influenced the children's future. Participant 13 believes that children's involvement in M&E activities can increase children's self-confidence and competence and their awareness of their role as rights holders. Consequently, children become more aware of their rights and are more likely to claim their rights.

Also, the collaboration between adults and children can have a positive effect on the relationship between the two. A condition for this is that adults are willing to listen to children and help build a trusting relationship by treating children with respect. This collaboration can help to improve children's societal safety and protection as a whole as children who experienced abuse, for instance, might feel comfortable sharing their stories with adults. Similarly, adults will be more willing to listen to children. However, some interview participants revealed that listening to children's voices can have negative effects on the relationship between children and adults. This is the case if the environment is not safe for children to speak out, or if the adults are not ready to listen to children's voices. In such cases, it can be challenging and risky for children to share their stories because it might mean that they must step up against the adult leaders (Participant 1). To make it a supportive activity for both children and adults, it is, therefore, crucial to educate children and adults before the activities and continuously during and after the activities (ARC, n.d.).

Using both children's and adult's voices can inform decision-makers

The findings reveal diverse contexts in which children's voices informed decision-makers at various program stages, including feedback on situation and context analysis, validation of problems and brainstorm on solutions, advice on enhancing children's participation in programming, and giving input for reporting. This collaborative approach does not only contribute to more responsive and effective programmes to meet children's needs but has the potential to foster children's wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

This section summarises the findings for the three dimensions of child-led M&E in the development aid sector, and discusses how they help to answer the central research question.

CHILD-LED RESEARCH METHODS TO USE FOR M&E IN THE DEVELOPMENT AID SECTOR

The findings reveal that traditional methods are easy to use by both children and adult researchers and can be adapted to the context and purpose of the M&E activity. However, children might face difficulties in analysing the findings and steering the discussions by themselves. Consequently, traditional methods can only partly be classified as suitable for use in child-led M&E, under the condition that these are used with older children who have already acquired sufficient skills or if the children have been trained to manage the methods by themselves. The research identified a wide range of participatory methods that make use of various practices and materials, such as images and pictures, storytelling, writing, drama, mapping, scoring, and ranking activities. Overall, the research findings reveal that participatory methods are seen as suitable for child-led M&E in various contexts and with children of various ages as they are adaptable to children's knowledge, skills and understanding. The methods also allow children to take ownership of the activities because they can make use of the methods for their purpose without the need for much guidance from adults.

BEST PRACTICES TO ACCOUNT FOR THE ETHICAL DIMENSION OF CHILD-LED MONITORING AND EVALUATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT AID SECTOR

The research findings confirm that guidelines are needed to ensure the ethical participation of children in child-led M&E. The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's

Participation form a comprehensive framework to account for ethical concerns. However, the findings reveal that the principles should be carefully analysed in the context of planned activities. Aspects that might require further consideration include informed consent, payment and compensation. Support structures should be put in place to ensure meaningful and ethical participation of children. Organisations should develop various organisational structures to ensure ethical practice for involving children in monitoring and evaluation. This may include the creation of safe places and structures that encourage them to share their views, integrate children's voices in decision-making processes, and increase accountability by reporting to children how their ideas have been incorporated into programming. The research, thus, makes it clear that various dimensions influence ethical aspects when involving children in M&E activities.

ROLE OF ADULTS IN CHILD-LED M&E IN THE DEVELOPMENT AID SECTOR

Adults play various roles in child-led M&E in the development aid sector. First, adults in children's lives offer additional sources of understanding. This specifically applies to contexts where adults might be more entitled than children to raise discussions or call out problems. In such cases, adults' voices will add more reliable and quality information. Furthermore, it can be supportive for both children and adults to have children's voices heard. Adults report that listening to children builds more trusting relationships between children and adults and provides them with new insights for programming.

Adults also report that children's involvement challenged them to develop child-friendly research methods. Children benefit in various ways on both the individual and group levels. On the individual level, children experience an increased level of self-confidence and competence. On the group level, the involvement of children empowers them to learn about their role as rights holders. Lastly, the interview findings show that children's involvement in M&E can have various effects on the relationships between adults and children. The effects can be both positive and negative and depend on cultural factors such as how much children's voices are listened to and valued in their respective societies. The research findings confirm that using both children's and adults' voices can inform decision-makers in various stages of programming. Examples of how children's voices inform decision-makers include: giving feedback, prioritising program goals, validating problems, and giving input.

WHAT ARE BEST PRACTICES FOR CHILD-LED M&E IN THE DEVELOPMENT AID SECTOR?

Best practices for child-led M&E have been identified and recorded considering the following dimensions: the application of various methods, the ethical dimension, and the role of adults. The practices have proven to be effective in a real-life setting as confirmed by experts. They are also likely to be replicable in other settings within the development aid sector.

The findings demonstrate that various methods can be used and combined in child-led M&E. These range from traditional methods to participatory methods. However, methods should be chosen according to the specific context of the activity and the characteristics of the children involved, such as level of literacy, skills, knowledge, and understanding. Overall, the findings showed that participatory methods are overall seen as suitable for child-led participation. These findings affirm assertions of various studies of the availability of a variety of methods, including participatory methods, and art-based methods. Also, the literature emphasizes the need for careful selection of the methods as children might respond differently to the methods.

Several methods can be put in place to account for the ethical dimension of child-led M&E in the development aid sector. The Nine Basic Requirements for Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation (Save the Children, 2020) can be seen as a comprehensive guideline for this. The research discussed several aspects more in-depth, such as informed consent, payment and compensation, ownership of children throughout the M&E cycle, and the need for organisational support structures. The study findings reflect the findings of the literature review that emphasizes the importance of ethical considerations, guidelines, and organisational structures.

There are various roles that adults take on in child-led M&E. The research confirms all three roles that were identified in the conceptual framework, namely: adults offer additional sources of understanding, hearing the voices of children and adults can be supportive for both groups, and input from adults and children can inform decision-makers.

In conclusion, participatory methods are suitable for child-led M&E in the development aid sector. This is because they allow for a variety of expressions, such as through drawings, pictures, and movements, thereby accommodating children's right to participation. Furthermore, they match ethical criteria for meaningful and ethical children's participation. Participatory methods are seen as child-friendly and inclusive to children of different ages and cultural backgrounds. Participatory methods allow children to be involved in the design of activities, from choosing the methods to analysis of data using mapping activities. This indicates that children can have much ownership over the process, allowing adults to take the role of facilitators in child-led monitoring and evaluation in the development aid sector.

LIMITATIONS

The research was successful in identifying best practices by incorporating data from several sources. The findings reveal practices that have found effective application across various contexts in the development aid sector. However, the research has not captured all best practices especially those that have not yet been published or are not yet widely known. Also, children themselves were not included as interview partners. To minimise the effect of this limitation on the research, the researcher used several sources of data including desk research published by adults and children to explore the field in-depth and capture reflections of various stakeholders.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Magdalene Nickel orcid.org/0009-0004-6871-4605
Windesheim Honours College, Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, NL

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