Evaluating *Participatory* Evaluation[i]

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An Evaluation in the context of development sector is, at the end, a research study to understand whether the development programme has achieved or is achieving its purpose. Communities at margins need to be important stakeholder in such evaluations[ii]. Evaluations have several stages- from objective setting, design development, data collection, analysing and inferencing, dissemination, and use of the evaluation product. Ideally, a participatory evaluation requires communities to have role in all these stages.

Community Participation in Evaluation					
Objective Setting	Design Development	Data Collection	Analysis/ Inference	Dissemination	Use

However, invariably, most evaluations identify only the stage of the data collection as the stage for community participation. A first-hand information of whether programme has influenced their lives is surely very significant. In 90% of our evaluation assignments, our role is often restricted to the stage of data collection. Our objective is to democratize the data collection process. When I say democratization, I have three power relationship in mind: one, researcher versus community; two, the research methodology versus research participant; and three, the power relationships among communities which are governed by caste, gender, and class.

We use several participatory tools primarily to reduce the power of researcher and enhance the role of communities to engage with their own information and reflect on all these power relationships. We recognize two important aspects: One, that evaluation itself is an external intervention, because the communities are rarely involved in setting objectives of the evaluation; and two, including the voice of powerless during the evaluation is a political process, and cannot be a technical one-time process[iii].

However, we have organized evaluations where we had the opportunity to involve community members in co-creating evaluation design. With support from Gates Foundation, we evolved the Community Ownership and Preparedness Index to evaluate the community mobilization component of the Avahan programme[iv]. It was a six month long extensive

consultation with sex worker, MSM and Injecting drug users communities in different districts. The expert team itself had two members of marginalised identities. Similarly, the community researchers organized data collection in 5% of sample. Further, the community leaders participated in assigning weightage to different indicators during the analyses. Moreover, we also started evolving community-led ethical review board[v] to provide ethical clearance on the research protocols.

It is pertinent to say that by ensuring community participation in the design development, the indicators of change were very grounded; questions were contextual; and sub-questions varied according to the context. During analyses, weightages were varied and evolved according to the local situation as well as to the programmatic level. They were user determined weightages. CBOs used this information at their own level[vi].

Community Participation in Evaluation: Community Ownership and Preparedness Index					
Objective Setting	Design Development	Data Collection	Analysis/ Inference	Dissemination	Use

| Design Development				
Preliminary Plan	Defining Indicators	Questions/ Schedules	Assigning Weightage	Ethics

Nevertheless, even in this experience, if I rate the community participation in evaluation in a 5-point scale, it would not be more than 3 out of 5. Firstly, we went through community-based organisations. These CBOs were largely projects of NGOs. CBOs leaders were often selected with Project-based priorities. They may not necessarily reflect voices of communities at margins. Secondly, the overall evaluation agenda was still top-driven. The role of communities or CBOs in the macro-programmatic level decision making was almost negligible. Evaluation also could not influence that level of democratization- for at that level the power relationship was still between the Global donor and the local partners, who were also largely subsidiaries of the Global North funders. The local organisations and CBOs had tokenistic presence in those programmatic negotiations of objectives and financing.

We also had an opportunity to facilitate community role in evaluating a global process of development of sustainable development goals. The UN had set up a High-Level panel (HLP), consisting of internationally renowned experts which recommended a set of goals. Through Participate initiative co-steered by IDS, Sussex, we formed a Ground Level Panel (GLP) to evaluate the HLP recommendations. The GLP brought together 14 community members of diverse marginalized identities. Their expertise was their lived experience of poverty and marginalization. This group was made aware of HLP recommendations. They collected their own information and reviewed certain relevant secondary data and came out with their own recommendations. They presented their views to UN agencies stressing on the fact, "It is our lives that you dissect and tear apart and fill the pages of your policies with."[vii]

Community Panel Evaluating High Level Panel recommendations					
Objective Setting	Design Development	Data Collection	Analysis/ Inference	Dissemination	Use

They came with three categories of Sustainable development goals. In the basic category, the goals were related to Roti (food), Kapda (clothes), Makaan (Shelter), Paani (water), Education and health. They stated that this category of goals has not been achieved for decades because of the absence of focus on the second category of goals- Inequality, Tax evasions by corporates, lack of collectivization of citizens, and lack of participation spaces for communities in policy making institutions. And that the second category of goals cannot be achieved unless the discrimination, marginalization and stigmatization basis caste, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and disability are addressed. The key evaluation finding was that the HLP goals aim at achieving development outcomes within the four walls of patriarchy, caste system, racism, and capitalism.
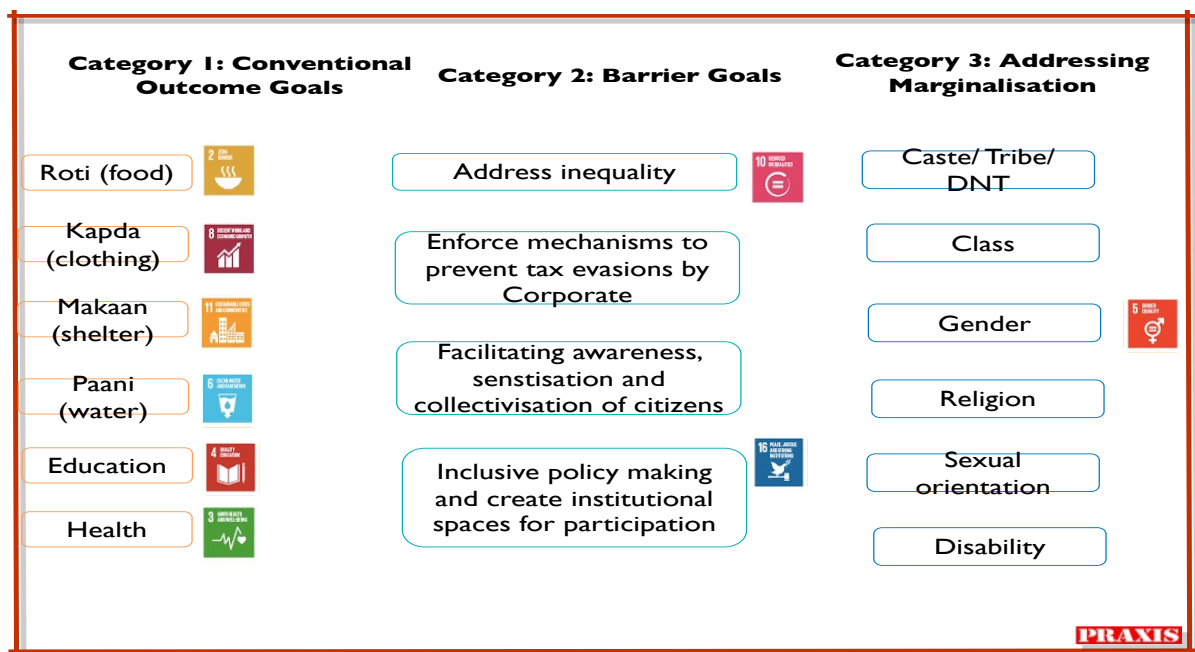

The GLP process is a powerful participatory evaluation process. It empowered the communities with the knowledge of global policy dialogues and helped them have a voice in those platforms. However, in retrospect, from the lens of participation, it was a one-time event[viii]. GLP's information got respect as "commodity", with no space eventually for community. There is a powerful mainstream, which wants "participation" of margins to just legitimize itself. Did we, as evaluators not facilitate that? This needs to haunt us. No?

The development dilemma, clearly, is the third category structural goals identified by GLP. In another experience of engaging with nomadic communities[ix], we facilitated setting objectives of community-based monitoring of SDGs with an alliance group of nomadic communities, followed by developing the monitoring design of the same. The idea was that community groups set objectives and define indicators, while organisation like Praxis facilitate data collection and provide an analysis to them on their dotted lines. While we could not mobilise resources for the same, there was a distinct learning for us from this experience.

Nomadic Communities : Community led Monitoring of SDGS					
Objective Setting	Design Development	Data Collection	Analysis/ Inference	Dissemination	Use

Some of the communities do engage in intergenerational sex work[x], we found that anti-trafficking organisations are clueless. The rescue-rehabilitation framework does not work here, as general blueprint is to rehabilitate 'survivors' in own family, neighbourhood or community. For them, in any other context, 'Source' is the panacea- where 'rescued survivors' are facilitated to live within the protective morality determined by law, families, and communities. None of these operate for this community- as it is already on the wrong side of Caste hierarchy, law, morality, patriarchy, and stigmatized migration. Much before the pandemic forced returned migrants faced stigmatization of Covid created 'untouchability', these members are facing isolation for centuries, being called 'pardesi' (outsiders) in their own settled or resettled villages. The evaluation community is in a dilemma. Many so termed survivors in this community who moved into alternatives- such as higher education and other work do engage in sex work on random basis. Our measurers are imprisoned in the moral binary. They do not appreciate the change. Moreover, these community members even after moving into alternative do not talk ill of sex work, for their community live on this work. The measurers are not able to prove narrative shift as well. Further, in this community it becomes much clearer- All who are termed as "forced" into sex work cannot be assumed to have-not exercised personal choice to be in sex work. All who have "chosen" to be in sex work cannot be assumed as not forced by circumstances". Now, the 'choice' is the key driver term for neo-liberal measurers. Would measurers challenge the Patriarchal definition of 'Choice'? They won't because measurers are not from this community, nor are communities able to find space in the evaluation other than being a passive respondent, being subjected to extractive participatory process of evaluators. At the end, everything boils down to, not participatory evaluation, but participation of community as well as those with diverse lived experience in the evaluation ecosystem.
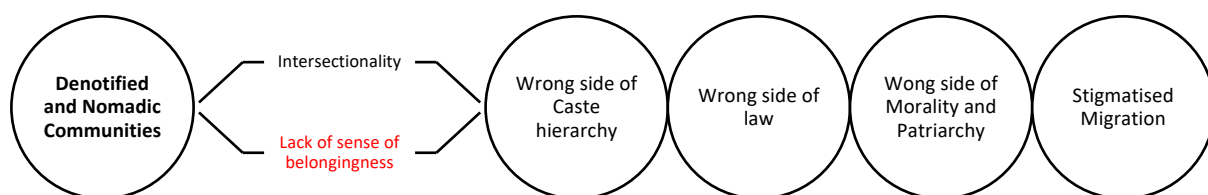
Where is the real challenge for Participation in Evaluations? One, we need to acknowledge that the Global North controls not only funding but also spaces of knowledge certifications (journal publishing), institutional ethical review boards, methodology (including dominance of RCT methodologies), and convenient use of the evaluation products. Moreover, they control spaces of teaching evaluation to the prospective evaluators. Two, within the Global North, even this knowledge creation function has shifted from State funded (public) University leadership to privately funded assignments or even private think tanks. Three, the real challenge is often that the Global North comes with a package deal- a well-developed nexus of privileged. An average evaluator, funder, publisher, or a professor on evaluation is a White, Heterosexual, Able bodied, Urban Male living in the Global North protecting own privileges; who builds *partnership* with Dominant Caste Male led entity in the Global South,

who protects own privileges; and who in turn reaches out to the dominant sections among the community or promotes mainstream ideology, who need to protect their own privileges.
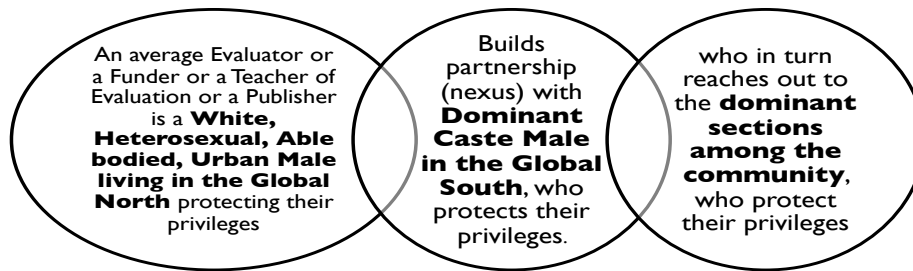
In other words, all our efforts to make evaluation process participatory happens within this context of hegemony. The key indicator of participation in evaluation, therefore, needs to be whether we are using our knowledge, resource and energy on making our processes in evaluation participatory to challenge the hegemony of the Global North, racism, Patriarchy, and caste system. Let us debrahminise measurement.

However, let me end with an optimistic note. This is the 25th year of Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices. We have been part of more than 100 evaluations or similar assignments. In 2008, we were among the first Global South evaluators in India, which was engaged in HIV intervention, by the Gates Foundation as lead agency for monitoring and evaluation. 14 years hence, now, there are many more evaluators in the Global South. They are trying to emerge from the shadows of the Global North evaluators. As Marx said in 1848, "A spectre is haunting Europe". I can vouch that a spectre is haunting the evaluation community in the Global North today. This is the spectre of feminist, anti-racist, anti-caste, anti-hatred evaluations, now transforming to indigenous led evaluation. They are present in the Global South and probably, in more numbers and with more visibility, in the margins of the Global North. The need is to build solidarity. The Global Change Centre[xi], a Southern entity has embarked into it. We need to be wary of decorative prefixes that the mainstream evaluation community might come out with. It's not just about using participatory methods and approaches, it's about using these approaches to *challenge* current mainstream ideologies. Is it not?

[i] A presentation made at gLOCAL Evaluation Week, 2022, May 31, 2022 at Session PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION APPROACHES: CONTEXTUALISING GENDER, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN SOUTH ASIA, organized by GENSA. https://www.glocalevalweek.org/event-detail/44318

[ii] Most development sector interventions especially in India are aimed at reaching out to marginalised communities such as women, dalit (scheduled castes), adivasis (scheduled tribes), rural poor population, sex workers, transgender, people with disability or children.

[iii] "Whether the transformation has begun towards the correct end or not? It would depend on your tool and methods. Do your tools perpetuate status quo or change it? Tools are not apolitical. Evolving so-called neutral tools (caste agnostic) in a caste system affected society: do these tools not end up saluting the caste system? The Participatory tools are transformational, only if the facilitator understands the potential of the same".
https://kabali2016.wordpress.com/2020/11/19/uncommon-common-sense-in-participatory-research/

[iv] Avahan programme is HIV targeted intervention programme funded by BMGF. Praxis developed the community Mobilisation monitoring system for its national programme.

[v] Read more about this at https://duracuk-lb01-production.terminalfour.net/media/durham-university/research-/research-centres/social-justice-amp-community-action-centre/for/news/Developing-Community-led-Ethical-Review-Processes-in-India---Issues-and-Challenges.pdf

[vi] Details available at https://jech.bmj.com/content/66/Suppl_2/ii26

[vii] Please read more at https://post2015voices.wordpress.com/2013/07/04/ground-level-panel-india/

viii After a time, there was a realisation that there is actually 'nothing next' for individual participants. They gained a lot of knowledge but could not articulate or envision how to apply this knowledge. The facilitating organisation also had no ideas or plan for individual panelists. Suddenly, the set of highly participatory panel discussions appeared to be very extractive as far as these individual panelists were concerned. The fact that they were instrumental in pushing voices of the community into policy debates is appreciated, but the fear that the momentum created has no place in the life of each community panelist is worth pondering. https://civicus.org/thedatashift/blog/community-participation-can-extractive-may-mindful/

ix The denotified, nomadic and semi nomadic tribes are such communities where were criminalized through a colonial legislation, Criminal Tribes Act, 1871; and then later denotified in 1950s. Some of these communities such as Nat, Bachara do engage in inter-generational sex work.

x Read more about our experience at https://academic.oup.com/cdj/article-abstract/55/1/64/5696850

xi Read more about the initiative at https://globalchange.center/en/