

Child-centred evaluations from child-friendly design to dissemination: Lessons from 5 African countries



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Background: Child participation in evaluation and research is key to ensure horizontal accountability and respect the rights of the children to voice their opinions on actions that have a direct impact on their lives. The author uses illustrative examples to describe how child-focused evaluation and research can be implemented in practices and discusses the main challenges and lessons learnt.

Objectives: To reflect on the current evaluation practices and identify clear ways to ensure children and other marginalised groups can meaningfully participate in evaluation and research processes.

Method: Children from 8 years to 18 years were involved in various evaluation and research assignments through different data collection and dissemination methods in five African countries.

Results: The experiences show practically how children can successfully be engaged in evaluation and research through meaningful consultations that are both safe and ethical and through adapted communication materials and channels to ensure horizontal accountability.

Conclusion: Ensuring the meaningful participation of children in evaluation and research processes is not only a right for children but also a great opportunity to enhance the design of evaluation and research pieces to make them more engaging and human-centred. The use of child-focused approach brings its own set of challenges and questions that evaluators can navigate with the support from relevant stakeholders. It requires authors to think outside of the box, be creative and put ourselves in the shoes of our main audience to develop the most suitable engagement strategies.

Contribution: This article represents the culmination of a comprehensive research endeavor, from conceptualisation to data analysis and findings interpretation, conducted solely by the main author. The different pieces were reviewed for quality assurance by Helene Juillard. The illustrations presented in the article were made by Clementine Guivarch' based on the author's guidance and inputs.

Keywords: evaluation; research; child; participation; accountability; human-centred.

Introduction

Accountability has become a prominent topic in the humanitarian and development sectors over the last decade, as set reference documents such as the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS Alliance, Group URD and the Sphere Project 2014). Accountability has been defined as having 'obligations to act in ways that are consistent with accepted standards of behaviour and that they will be sanctioned for failures to do so' (Grant & Keohane 2005). Hilhorst et al. (2021) distinguish three components of accountability: (1) listening and communication, which overlaps with participation and participatory approaches, (2) giving account and ensuring transparency and (3) being responsible and taking 'ownership for actions and non-actions to accept credit and blame' (Hilhorst et al. 2021). Accountability can be 'upward' (i.e. towards donors, government, etc.) or 'downward' (i.e. towards affected communities), (Dorothea Hilhorst et al. 2021) also sometimes called 'horizontal' accountability (Lührmann, Marquardt & Mechkova 2020). As a result, it is now widely accepted that consulting project participants about the assistance they receive and ensuring that they are provided with the right opportunities to give their opinion about its design and implementation are central to improving the quality of programming. Evaluations, too, can be used as a vehicle to apply accountability principles in the humanitarian project cycle. Evaluation can be defined as:

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[T]he systematic and objective assessment of an on-going or completed project, programme or policy, its design, implementation and results [...] Evaluation also refers to the process of determining the worth or significance of an activity, policy or program. (OECD/DAC 2007 based on Michael Scriven 2007). (p. 138)

In order to assess the significance or worth of a project, evaluation processes usually include consultations with project recipients and/or their representatives. In projects where children are the main target population, evaluators can limit themselves to consultations with parents, caregivers, teachers and other adults who take an active role in children's growth and development. Alternatively, evaluators can also directly include children in the evaluation process, allowing their opinions to be heard by implementers in order to further improve their experience of humanitarian and development project. According to Lansdown, 'these both provide them with a sense of ownership and interest in the outcomes and helps them to work towards their improvement' (Lansdown 2005). In addition, and as described by Hulshof, child-focused evaluations or research pieces that do not provide the space for children to voice their opinions risk misrepresenting children's perspective and experiences, and lose the opportunity to create greater impacts and satisfaction for its main recipients (Hulshof 2019).

Nonetheless, numerous are the evaluations of child-focused projects and programmes, which either do not consult children or do it with the same tools and approaches than adults. A lack of adaptation to the age of the target group can turn the consultative process into a negative experience for the children. It can either put them in tedious and/or uncomfortable situations or make them waste time and efforts in a process that does not allow them to contribute to their best ability (leading to poor quality data and use of this time and resources). Children who contribute to evaluations and research pieces also rarely have the opportunity to see what their participation has led to and to hold project implementers accountable. Evaluation and research outputs often include lengthy reports, which are rarely easily accessible for project participants and even more so for children:

The utility of the results and probability of transformative change increases when reports and other products (such as guidelines and documents) are developed in close collaboration with stakeholders. Children make up an important stakeholder group that is often excluded from evaluation activities. (Van Rensburg & Van Rensburg 2020)

Highlighting how evaluators or researchers can best gauge children's opinion in a safe and effective manner and how the results from the evaluation can be fed back to communities in a child friendly manner in Africa is one of the objectives of this article.

Study objectives

This article has been developed to capitalise on an approach developed by the author focusing on the adoption of child-

focused data collection and dissemination methods. Its main objectives are as follows:

- Provide an overview of how evaluation designs can be adapted to better fit the needs, expectations and capacities of children as the main target group of humanitarian and development projects in Africa.
- Highlight the main challenges and lessons learnt of the suggested approach.
- Outline opportunities for a more fruitful participation and engagement of children in research and evaluation in Africa.

Key questions

For a better participation and engagement of children in research and evaluation in Africa, the article addresses three main questions:

- The first one is how can evaluation and research designs be tailored to the needs, expectations and capacities of a child audience? The author specifically looked at which data collection methods work best for gauging children's opinion in a safe, ethical and effective manner
- The second main question studied was what are the main challenges related to the adaptation of the evaluation design to a younger audience in Africa?
- The third question was how could the participation and engagement of children in research and evaluation in Africa be further enhanced?

Research methods and design

This article has been developed based on the experience of the author working both as an evaluator herself and as an evaluation commissioner for child-focused programmes. More specifically, this article draws on the following experiences:

- Final evaluation of Save the Children's Child Sponsorship programme in Mali
- Midterm evaluation of Save the Children's Child Sponsorship programme in Niger
- Final evaluation of the Yes I Do programme and alliance in Ethiopia, Kenya, Indonesia, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia (with only Ethiopia, Malawi and Indonesia selected for in-country data collection with children)
- Research on childhood under coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and school closure in Nepal and Zambia for Save the Children Child Sponsorship team.

As part of each of these experiences, more than 100 children were consulted through different child friendly methods in each country on topics such as the relevance of the project, their effectiveness to address child protection issues, the impact of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), etc.

The author developed an approach to child-focused evaluation and research starting from the design of the evaluation and research piece to the dissemination of findings. Through continuous feedback from commissioning organisations and their staff members on the ground as well

as children themselves at the end of the activities, the approach has been further refined and the author collected the main lessons learnt. Those lessons learnt were also consolidated through informal discussions with other practitioners in the sector.

Study limitations

The article could have benefitted from a more in-depth review of practices related to child-focused evaluation and research in the humanitarian and development sectors through a systematic review and structured key informant interviews with other evaluation practitioners. This was not feasible within the scope of this article because of time constraints.

Results

How can evaluation and research designs be tailored to the needs, expectations and capacities of a child audience?

This approach to child-focused evaluation and research was elaborated with five main objectives in mind:

- To find ways to amplify children's voices within the scope of an evaluation or piece of research as children represented the primary group of the programmes' expected beneficiaries;
- To provide children with the opportunity to: (1) express their own opinions; (2) make suggestions on how to improve the programme and (3) put forward recommendations on matters that directly impact their lives;
- To ensure that the programmes' unintended negative effects on children be identified;
- To develop within the commissioning organisations an appetite for more inclusive evaluation and research practices; and
- To increase the programme implementers' accountability towards the children being served.

From the inception and design phase of the evaluation or research, the evaluator considered how to ensure the meaningful and safe participation of children in the process. By meaningful, we consider that participation in evaluation and research should be:

- **Transparent and informative:** children clearly understand their right to express their views and that they will be heard and valued.
- **Voluntary:** children have received sufficient information to understand the choices available to them, what they mean and how to engage.
- **Respectful:** children's views are treated with respect by adults and by other children and are able to express their views without fear of discrimination.
- **Relevant:** children are able to contribute their expertise and draw upon their experiences, knowledge and capabilities to express their views on issues of relevance and importance to their lives.

- **Child friendly:** working methods do not discriminate children but take into account their evolving capacities, age, diversity and capabilities. The methods used promote children's confidence in speaking out, sharing and expressing their views.
- **Inclusive:** recognising that children do not all belong to one homogeneous group; participation promotes inclusiveness and treats each child as an individual. The participation process takes into consideration the existing patterns of discrimination, power imbalances and cultural sensitivities.
- **Supported by training:** all facilitators working with children have been trained and equipped to work effectively with children. Specifically, facilitators working with children possess excellent communication skills, facilitation skills and analytical skills.
- **Safe and sensitive to risk:** children know that all considerations in relation to their safety and protection from harm have been taken into account.
- **Accountable:** children receive feedback on how their contribution has advised, informed or influenced developments to date. (Save the Children 2021).

As a result, the approach developed rests on two main pillars further described below and which integrate all nine principles:

- The employment of age-appropriate data collection methods.
- The use of child friendly dissemination materials and strategies as a way to 'give back' to children and show them how their contribution was used during the evaluation or research.

Pillar 1: The employment of age-appropriate data collection methods

The choice of appropriate data collection mechanisms as part of child-focused evaluation and research entails the adaptations of several components compared to adult-focused evaluations which include:

- **Methods:** data collection methods should be picked based on several criteria such as the specific age of the children whom the evaluation was conducted with, the objectives of the data collection and the type of information we are trying to collect (success stories, feedback on the entire project, etc.), the themes/topics covered during the consultations and specifically the sensitivity of the cases which might require a level of confidentiality that does not allow for group activities, and the context (e.g. level of children's familiarity with technology, etc.). Children may benefit from research and evaluation methods that 'engage them, accommodate lower comprehension and literacy than adults, provide safety of expression, and support sharing of experiences even when discussing potentially uncomfortable topics' (Chenhall et al. 2013; Lys et al. 2018).

There is a wide range of methods that can be considered such as asking children to answer a question through drawings, drama and storytelling or photographs through Photovoice, for example (Budig et al. 2018), the use of body mapping (Lys et al. 2018), emoji boards (Bosch & Revilla 2021), the 'H' assessment (Feinstein & O'Kane 2008), peer data collection (International Planned Parenthood [IPPF] 2013), etc.

- Many resources are now available online based on the outcomes that evaluators expect to get out of the consultations. For instance, as part of the piece of research on the effect of COVID-19 and school closure in Zambia, the author wanted to measure the effect of the crisis on the social network of the children in order to assess the extent to which the social circle of children (including adults and peers) had reduced. Most social network mapping instruments for adults rely on questioning, either in an interview or as a self-reporting tool (Samuelsson, Thernlund & Ringström 1996). This can be an issue, especially for younger children, who often lack the cognitive skills necessary for understanding and answering abstract questions. As such, the author conducted further research and found an approach called the Five Field Map, which has been elaborated for children and tested with them. It is easy to understand and not too time-consuming, while fitting the needs of the research. The Five Field Map is a method allowing children and facilitators to draw a structured social network map. The map comprised six concentric circles and divided into five sectors, namely family, relatives, formal contacts, school, and friends or neighbours. According to Samuelsson et al. (1996), children easily understood the instructions and enjoyed drawing the map. The map allows children and researchers to look at the structure of the network by showing the number of people in each sector and the distribution of children or adults and males or females. It also measures closeness and attachment by evaluating how near to the centre of the map the child has placed important persons. Furthermore, negative contacts, conflicts and dissatisfaction are marked specifically in the map (Samuelsson et al. 1996). This tool was used by children to draw their social network before COVID-19 and during lockdown and school closure and showed some interesting results. This is an example of how the choice of method can be adapted to the objectives of the evaluation or research and to the age of the target group.
- Language: When engaging with children instead of adults as part of an evaluation or research piece, it is necessary to simplify the language based on the target group, taking into account age, cultural sensitivity and level of education, among others. The use of complex concepts should be avoided, including when requesting consent. The phrasing of the questions is also important to allow children to take part in the process meaningfully. The use of the mother tongue is also crucial. As such, when evaluating Save the Children's programme in Mali,

the author worked with a local counterpart who was able to lead the activities in Bambara.

- Expectations: The evaluators' and commissioners' expectations should also be adjusted when engaging children instead of adults in an evaluation process, particularly regarding the expected quantity of information shared by children, the length of the activities, the number of evaluation/research questions to be covered, etc. As an example, in Ethiopia and Malawi as part of the Yes I Do programme and alliance evaluation, the children were only consulted on one aspect of the evaluation, which was its impact (children were asked to illustrate with photos and to collect peer stories on the main changes that the programme brought to their lives and communities and explain why this was important/relevant to them). The other evaluation questions were covered through other methods.

In order to ensure that the methods, language and expectations were safe and aligned with the capacities of the children and the context of the programme, the author put in place various strategies which included the following:

- The revision of the protocol by internal ethical boards (within the commissioning organisation)
- In-depth consultations with the national Child Protection Focal Points within each organisation on the choice of the data collection methods and the phrasing of questions
- Requesting clear information regarding referral pathways available in the visited communities to ensure that if cases or concerns of child protection risks were raised during the data collection exercises, they could be referred
- The collection of informed consent from both parents and children
- The collection of minimal personal data: no names, phone numbers, addresses or signature collected in order to minimise the risk of data protection breaches
- The creation of 'safe spaces' by limiting the number and type of people attending the activities held with the children, requesting to keep confidentiality and reassuring participants around the absence of judgement. As an example, in Mali, Ethiopia and Malawi, some of the programmes' components touched upon sexual and reproductive health and rights, which is a sensitive topic for children to talk about in front of the parents and members of the opposite sex. The authors made sure that parents were standing far enough for them not to be able to hear the conversation and created same gender groups.

The use of such principles allowed for the collection of rich data on a great variety of topics, which were not always considered or expected at the evaluation or research design stage. Children were given sufficient freedom and space to talk about the topics that really matter to them. Those views were then incorporated with the other findings from the evaluation/research into a final report, which was then

translated into a child friendly format in order to put into practice the ninth requirement for 'Meaningful and Ethical Children's Participation' as highlighted earlier.

Pillar 2: The use of child friendly dissemination materials and strategies

Children's participation is an:

... [O]ngoing process, which includes information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. ('Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 12, The Right of the Child to be Heard, CRC/C/GC/12, para 3' 2009)

This definition highlights the notion of dialogue and information sharing, which implies that children should be able to both share and receive information in order to fully participate in a process. In most evaluations, children are at most consulted, that is, sharing information with the evaluator, but they are rarely the recipients of information coming out of the evaluation process, which can be meaningful to them. Yet, dissemination materials and strategies can be developed in order to bridge this gap.

As part of the experiences mentioned earlier, the author developed various dissemination materials and strategies which can be replicated in order to ensure that children who take part in research and evaluation can have access to its main findings. For example, in Mali, the author worked with an illustrator on the production of a three-page comic strip highlighting the main results, which could be relevant to the children participating in the programme. The comic strip details in an accessible language the main positive and negative effects that were observed during the evaluation. The scenario is based on two main characters: Aïssa, who is a 15-year-old girl, and Siaka, who is a 13-year-old boy (see Figure 1).



FIGURE 1: The two main characters from the comic strip created in Mali.

The two children return to their respective villages after participating in Save the Children's activities as part of the Day of the African Child and the sponsorship programme. They discuss the programme as they walk. They mention, among others, that their school has now more pedagogic and didactic materials and supplies and latrines, which had an effect on girl's school attendance. They also talk about the reduction in cases of child marriages because the project started despite the resistance that the sensitisation on the topic faced at the beginning from some community members and the improved learning conditions at the village early childhood care and development (ECCD) centre despite some remaining challenges.

Extracts from the comic strip developed are available in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Similar materials were developed as part of the Yes I Do Alliance and Programme evaluation and of the COVID-19 research, in addition to an infographic which was developed for children and young people to make their government accountable. Images from the comic strip developed as part of the COVID-19 research for Save the Children in Zambia for a slightly older audience are available below in Figure 4 and Figure 5. The comparison between the Mali and Zambia comic strips shows how the language, scenario and drawing style can be adapted.

The comic strips have been translated into local languages to ensure its dissemination and reader-friendliness. For programmes working through the school system, they displayed the child friendly dissemination materials in classrooms in all schools targeted by the programmes. In other cases, and where relevant, the dissemination also took place through social media or through local facilitators.

For each material created, the drawing or design style, the background and the language were adapted to the age bracket of the main audience and the context. In Mali, for example, the author took detailed photos of the environment during the field mission in order for the illustrator to be able to reproduce accurately the villages and people.

In addition, all dialogues and text were reviewed by local staff members to adjust the language based on children's ways of speaking, which varies from one country to the other, even in countries speaking the same language.

Discussion

What are the main challenges related to the adaptation of the evaluation design to a younger audience in Africa?

Ensuring the meaningful participation of children in evaluation and research is not always an easy task. As touched upon here, it requires more collaboration than when only focusing on adults. Evaluators have, for example,

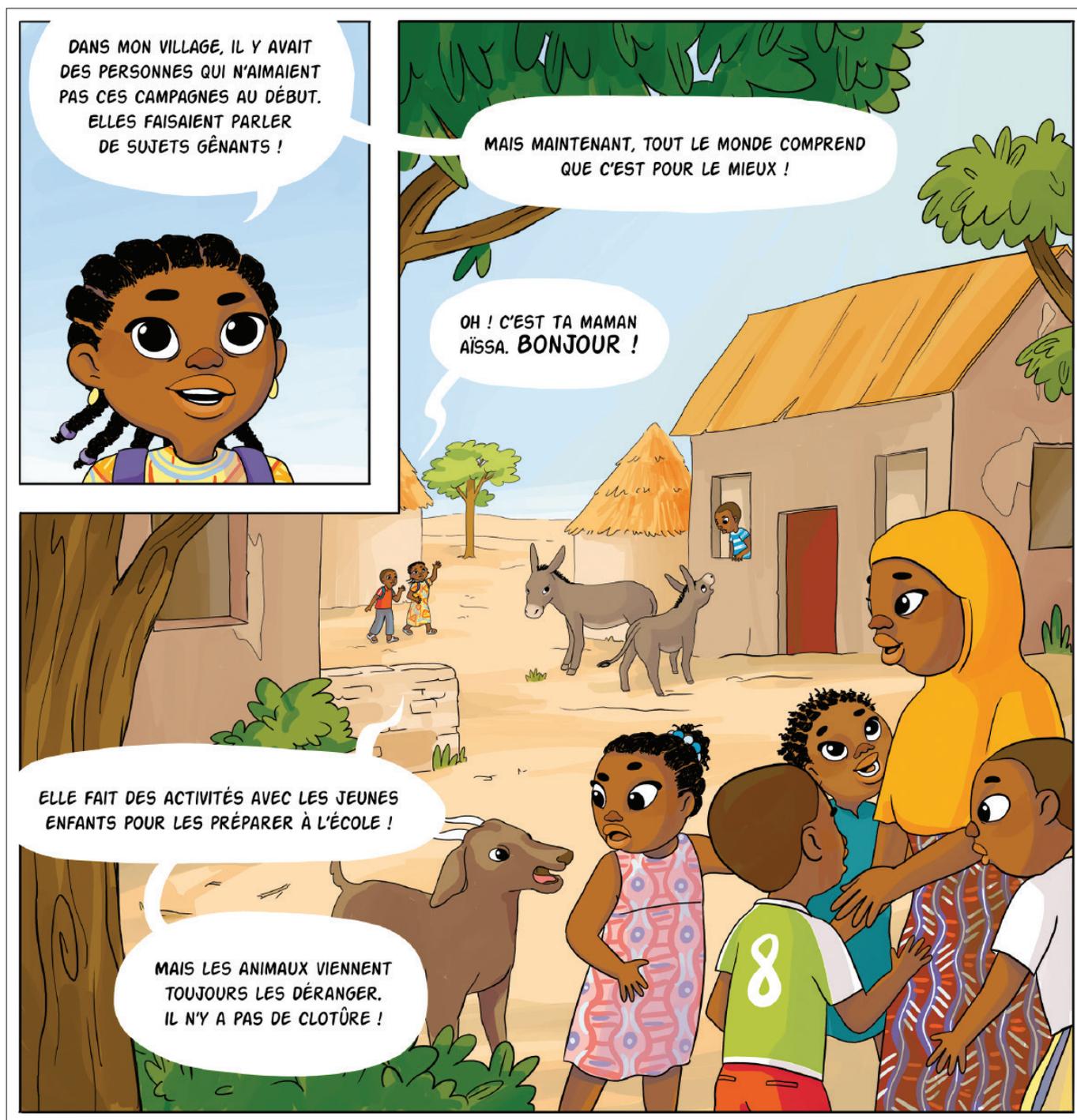


FIGURE 2: Extract 1 from the Mali comic strip.

to work closely with child protection and safeguarding focal points within each organisation and ethical boards to ensure that the methodology and tools are adequate and safe. While this is necessary to ensure safe and ethical participation, it can also bring additional adversity if evaluators face organisations and individuals who still see children as inapt to participate in the process. As summarised by Van Rensburg and Van Rensburg (2020), children are often still seen as:

[V]ulnerable, inexperienced and lacking the skills necessary to deal with complex issues and make decisions. There has been a

fear that children's participation risks their safety and could be unethical. This has resulted in organisations and governments generally acting for children rather than with them, neglecting their potential contributions. (p. 2)

This has also been highlighted by Björnsdóttir and Einarsdóttir (eds. 2018), Hörschelmann and Van Blerk (2011) and Freeman and Tranter (2011), among others.

Close collaboration is also needed while designing the dissemination materials with professional illustrators or designers and with local staff members to ensure the

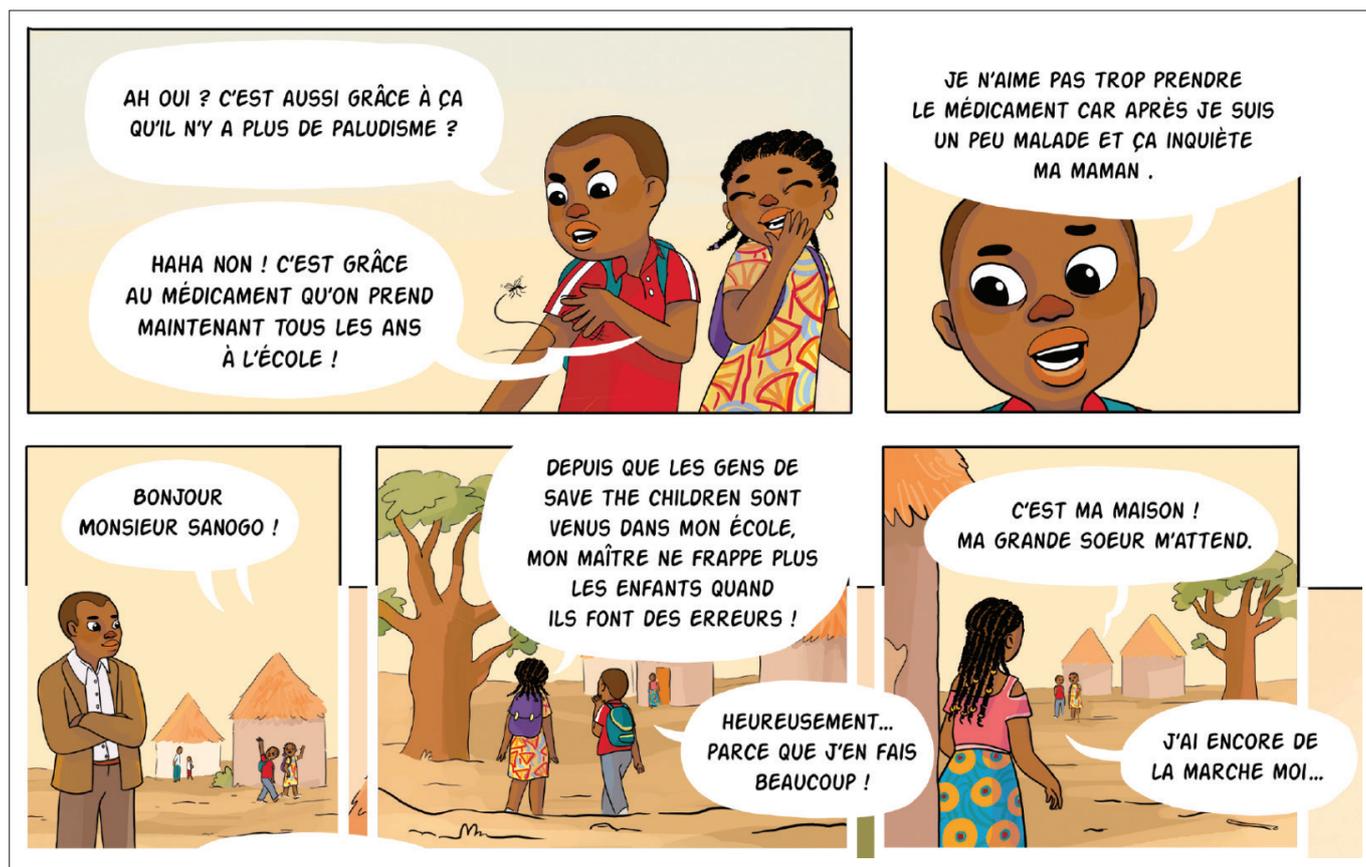


FIGURE 3: Extract 2 from the Mali comic strip.

adequacy of the messages, designs and language. This requires many back-and-forth at key stages of the evaluation or research, which should be anticipated in the evaluation or research planning both by the evaluator and the commissioning agency. Ensuring that results can be disseminated to a young audience also mean dedicated additional costs for the production of a child friendly material.

The role of timing cannot be underestimated in children's data collection exercises. They do not have the same flexibility as adults. If possible, data collection should be planned during school holidays to ensure that children are available. If this is not possible, as it was the case during the sponsorship programme evaluation in Mali and Niger, consultations with children should be organised either at the weekend or around the school schedule (for instance, during lunch break while giving children enough time to go back home and have lunch). In the African countries where this approach was put into practice, the author also noticed a better engagement from children in the evaluation or research activities in the afternoons, as many consulted children did not have breakfast in the morning and had a limited attention span before their lunch break. Flexibility is thus important in terms of planning and priority should be given to the discussions with children before scheduling other interviews and group discussions.

Ensuring the meaningful participation of children in evaluation and research also requires for evaluators to be

creative and think outside of the box. The 'usual suspects' in terms of data collection methods (focus group discussions, key informant interviews, survey) will in most cases not be the best option. Adapting methods to the context, age bracket, cultural preferences, sensibility of the topic and study objectives requires a certain level of creativity and efforts, both from the evaluators and the commissioning agency sides. Evaluation findings can suffer from a lack of credibility 'unless they satisfy high methodological expectations that might exist among some stakeholders' (Mbava & Dahler-Larsen 2019). The use of participatory, child friendly and more qualitative data collection methods is often seen as a not sufficient robust approach and evaluators have to face a trade-off between what seem to most as methodological rigour and concerns for practical feasibility and immediate usefulness of the findings (Mbava & Dahler-Larsen 2019).

In addition, for evaluators who do not speak the same language as the children's mother tongue, the role of the interpret or facilitator is absolutely critical and the selection process for this role requires a lot of attention. Ultimately, they are the ones engaging with the children and responsible for the way the messages are being communicated. As such, evaluators should ensure that they are trained, have sufficient experiences in child-focused programming and feel confident to engage with children before the start of the data collection activities.

Finally, the African context, and particularly the West African context, generally means a limited access to technology

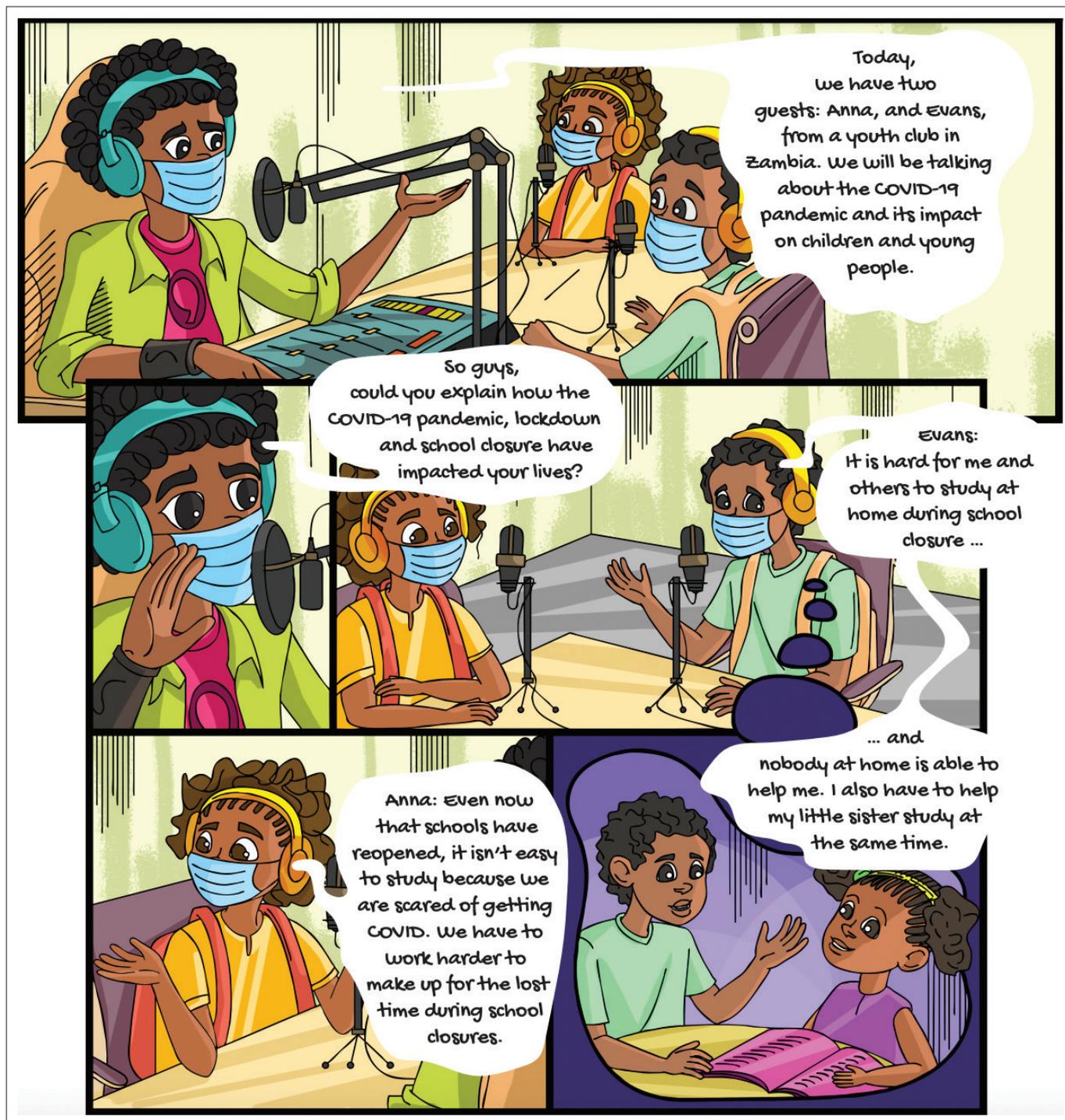


FIGURE 4: Extract 1 from the Zambia comic strip.

among the communities. This can be a challenge when trying to engage with children and young people remotely (e.g. during the recent COVID-19 pandemic or when security limits the access to an area). This also needs to be considered when elaborating a dissemination strategy.

It is interesting to notice that all those challenges could also apply to other categories of the population, and not only children. For instance, adults living with disabilities or adults who are illiterate could also benefit from adapted data collection and dissemination methods in research and

evaluation. More and more attention is currently given to human-centred design in research and evaluation in the humanitarian and development field:

Human-centred design is a creative approach to problem solving. It merges different methods and schools of thought – participatory, ethnographic, systems thinking and design – and has several key tenants at its core. The first is co-creation, a methodology focused on integrating different perspectives and including people who not only inform the design process, but actively engage in it. Second, the tools are designed to visualise patterns, processes, and ideas based on the realities of the target population. Most tools used in the process aim to draw out these



FIGURE 5: Extract 2 from the Zambia comic strip.

experiences using a combination of visual and verbal storytelling. Tools seek to spark conversations to draw out insights and understanding around a given theme. Third, it is rooted in a practical creative attitude with an emphasis both on thinking outside the box and testing ideas as soon as possible. (Hamilton, Casswell & Alonso 2020)

Human-centred design tools can include user journey mapping, dairies, tools helping participants to project themselves in the future, etc. The methods and approaches used in child-focused and human-centred designs are very similar, as they both require the use of more visual and creative

methods and the ability from the evaluator to put himself or herself in the shoes of the evaluation or research participants to find the most adequate methods of engagement. Through her experience working on developing and refining a child-focused approach to evaluation and research, the author has been able to apply some of the learnings and tools to the field of adult-focused evaluation and research through the human-centred design approach. This was found to be very useful in order to foster engagement, to break evaluation and research fatigue within the communities and to gather richer and more in-depth findings on specific topics.

How could the participation and engagement of children in research and evaluation in Africa be further enhanced?

Based on these experiences, the author has drawn a handful of recommendations and lessons learnt on how the approach could be refined to further enhance the participation and engagement of children in research and evaluation in Africa. They are presented as follows:

- As much as possible, evaluators should try and include children in the design of the evaluation or research including in the choice of questions, data collection methods, timing of the data collection exercise, data collection (through peer interviews for instance), identification of the main findings and design of the child friendly dissemination material. This was tested to some extent as part of the evaluation of the Yes I Do Alliance and Programme where the evaluation review group included a few young people (between 15 and 18 years old). However, because of time and budget constraints, their contribution was only limited as they were not given sufficient space and support to fully engage in the process. Achieving this objective of moving towards a child-led evaluation model requires a strong commitment from both the evaluator and the commissioning agency to dedicate the necessary resources to the process.
- Explore how ECCD facilitators or other community facilitators from the child-focused programme being evaluated could be involved not only in the data collection process by facilitating the workshops with children but also in the design of the tools and analysis as much as possible. This was already tested to some extent as part of another piece with encouraging results: community facilitators were trained on the basics of research/evaluation and data collection methods, collected themselves data with children and young people. This allowed for more flexible/convenient timing for children to take part, a greater level of trust and sharing during consultations and satisfying quality of the data collected. Those facilitators can also be great resource persons to disseminate the results from the evaluation or research process.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ensuring the meaningful participation of children in evaluation and research processes is not only a right for children but also a great opportunity to enhance the design of evaluation and research pieces by making it more user-focused and engaging. It is interesting to note how many of the approaches discussed as part of the article could also be applied to and benefit adult-focused evaluations and research, especially in contexts where limited education and literacy levels prevent participants from fully engaging in traditional methods of collecting and disseminating information.

The use of child-focused approach brings its own set of challenges and questions that evaluators can navigate with the support from relevant stakeholders. It requires the evaluator

or researcher to think outside of the box, be creative and put themselves in the shoes of our main audience to develop the most suitable engagement strategies. It also requires some adjustments and flexibility from the commissioning agency with regard to the resources made available to the evaluation or research process (time, financial and human resources). The approach proposed in this article is a first and easy step towards making evaluation and research more child-focused. Additional efforts are nonetheless required to reach the next steps, that is, to let the children lead the process.

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Author's contributions

C.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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