



Co-Creation in Development Research: A Practical Guide for Researchers



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This material was initially developed by Dr Tara Korti for Christian Aid's Research, Evidence and Learning team. It was adapted into a guidance document by Adébojá Fatiléwa-Adéèkó in recognition of its potential value for a broader range of audiences. The document therefore aims to support international development researchers in effectively exploring and applying the co-creation approach.

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their funding and flexibility, which enabled Christian Aid's Research, Evidence, and Learning team to apply this approach across various research projects.

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Summary of the guide

This guide was developed to aid the effective use of the co-creation approach in development research. It introduces co-creation methodologies that aim to decolonize research practices, shifting power dynamics and centring community knowledge in development work.

Drawing insights from co-creation processes used by Christian Aid in some key research pieces in the global South, this document describes and analyses the co-creation process of those research projects. Each applied an approach of co-creation, emphasizing:

- Co-design of the research.
- Intentional participant selection.
- Participatory data collection.
- Diversifying research methods and outputs.
- Intentional reciprocity and reflexivity at all stages of research and design.

It contains three sections:

1 Introduction to the concept of co-creation in research. This section lays the groundwork for the rest of the guide. It emphasises the relevance of the approach to international development researchers and practitioners and why this approach should be considered as a key approach in development research, especially for those seeking to promote knowledge justice.

2 Section 1 details the co-creation process. This section delves deeper into each step, providing concrete examples, and case studies to illustrate how co-creation can be effectively implemented in various research contexts.

3 Section 2 highlights key learning from Christian Aid's experience in using the co-creation approach in varying contexts. It explores both challenges and best practices.

We hope that this learning will provide value to other teams seeking to shift power in research, promote knowledge justice in the evidencing of development practice.

Key terms

Decolonial praxis: Decoloniality involves a critical mode of analysis that challenges the assumed universality of coloniality and its associated systems (Ranawana, 2023).

Reflexivity: Reflexivity in research is the practice and ability to examine our own motivations, feelings and responses, and how these influence the production of knowledge. See Christian Aid's and Tearfund's [research ethics guide](#) for practical suggestions for reflexive practice.

Introduction

What's the story?

In the evolving landscape of development research, there is a growing recognition of the need to understand how it can be made more inclusive of local actors and their knowledge systems as well as be more contextually relevant to the needs of marginalised and excluded communities. This speaks to a core aspect of employing a decolonial praxis in development: challenging colonial legacies in knowledge production and ensuring that research and practice are inclusive, equitable, and driven by the needs of the communities involved (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Traditional research methodologies in development often perpetuate existing power imbalances (Bilgen et al., 2021). As noted by Weaver (2023), there is a significant gap between the theory of knowledge co-production and its practice in the field. This gap is characterized by persistent power disparities between researchers and indigenous or marginalised communities.

In response, Christian Aid is striving to deepen an ethic of decoloniality in its research thinking and practice (see [Ranawana, 2023](#); [Cascant et al., 2024](#) and [Bollaert et al., 2022](#)). The goal is to shift power in research and ensure that community knowledge is not only visible but also central in informing development practice and advocacy work. Spearheading this is the [Research, Evidence and Learning](#) team whose work is guided by the question:

'How can evidence and learning spaces be transformed so that our partners and communities can exercise epistemic freedoms in knowledge creation processes?'

This question aligns with broader scholarly discussions on decolonial and inclusive research methodologies which point to 'co-creation' as a critical space which makes decolonising research possible.

What's co-creation?

Co-creation is a process that aids researchers to take on a decolonial praxis. In Christian Aid's position paper for research and evidence cultures, Ranawana (2023) states that 'Decoloniality, that is, taking on a decolonial praxis, requires us to first address epistemic questions: Who gets to know the world? Who gets to shape the world? Who or what is silent or silenced?'. Co-creation which is a participatory, sensitive and dialogical research process (Calabria, 2022), provides the opportunity to address these questions.

According to Istratii (2019), it requires prioritising diverse voices and knowledges while continually evaluating our own positionality, power, and geographical locations. Istratii emphasises that researchers should engage more substantively with indigenous voices and knowledge systems. This is especially critical when engaging historically marginalised communities (*ibid.*)



Co-creation principles to keep in mind

Seven key principles for co-creation can be deduced from the existing scholarship on this topic:



1. Power redistribution: Acknowledging and actively working to balance power relations between researchers and communities.



2. Co-production with indigenous communities: Through respectful partnerships and genuine power-sharing with indigenous communities, indigenous and Western knowledge systems can be bridged (Weaver, 2023). This bridging generates knowledge that is relevant and beneficial for all actors involved in the co-production process. It also promotes justice in knowledge production by acknowledging the value of historically excluded and marginalised ways of interpreting the social world.



3. Participatory methodologies: Employing research methods that are collaborative (Firchow and Gellman, 2021) or participatory in nature (Mora and Diaz, 2004 in Zavala 2013) will help centre community voices and experiences. Aileen Morten-Robinson (cited in Martin and Mirraoopa, 2003) cautions about methods that can perpetuate power imbalances between the researcher and the research subjects.



4. Creation of collective spaces: Employing a decolonial praxis demands that researchers create shared spaces (Zavala, 2013; Mafile'o et al 2022) that prioritise reflexivity (Mafile'o et al 2022.), relatedness (Martin and Mirraoopa, 2003), 'non-hierarchical interactions, understanding, and mutual learning' (Golfin, Rusansky and Zantvoort in Harcourt, 2022).



5. Community-led initiatives: A fundamental lesson from projects seeking to adopt a decolonial praxis is the aspect of 'where' the research grows from and who funds it. Hence, grassroots organisations and community-based structures must play a crucial and foundational role in the process of decolonising research related to indigenous communities (Zavala, 2013).



6. Cultural sensitivity: Adopting culturally appropriate practices in all stages of research, from design to dissemination, fosters strong relationships with participants (Martin and Mirraoopa 2003). This should be done by asking permission, using preferred language of the participants, using terms and expressions which articulate the ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of doing of the participants (*ibid.*).



7. Solidarity practices: Incorporating approaches like counter storytelling, interweaving of struggles, and decolonial love to foster deeper connections and understanding (Attallah et al., 2022). Attallah et al., (2022) indicate that storytelling and creating spaces for counter storytelling serve as a practice of decolonial solidarity. Community anchored counter storytelling is a form of epistemic justice as it centres the knowledges from the margins (Dutta et al, 2021; Atallah 2022). Exchanges and linkages across decolonial struggles are important (Attallah 2022). Decolonial love is about recuperating the love for one's people and for communal ways of being, knowing, and acting (*ibid.*).

This guide offers practical strategies for implementing these principles in development research.

Why use co-creation?

Key benefits:

- Bridges indigenous and Western knowledge systems.
- Can help reduce power asymmetry in research process or can shift power by reducing power asymmetry in research process.
- Produces contextually relevant research.
- Centres community voices and experiences.
- Leads to more nuanced and appropriate recommendations.
- Increases potential for sustainable solutions.

Christian Aid’s application of the co-creation approach

The co-creation approach has been informed by key components of Christian Aid’s [Evidence for Development Professionals](#) course, insights from our [position paper](#) for research and evidence cultures, insights from [our guide](#) for doing evaluation and research ethically, and lessons from scholarship on decolonial research discussed in the previous section.

The motive for using the co-creation approach was to have projects which are committed to equity in research partnerships and have a commitment to epistemic justice. In each project, the research design was aimed at centring the voices and lived experiences of the communities we work with.

This guide is based on Christian Aid’s co-design experience from several research projects that cover diverse thematic areas, contexts, and research methods:

Project	Theme	Locations	Contexts	Research methods
Fostering Gender-Just Macro Economic Recoveries	Feminist macroeconomic policymaking	Burkina Faso Sierra Leone Zimbabwe	■ ▲ ■ ●	◆ ◆ ▶
Addressing impunity for gender-based violence among displaced communities in Haiti	Gender-based violence	Haiti	■ ▲	◆
Social Protection Mechanisms and Access to Justice for Vulnerable People in Fragile Contexts	Social protection	Ethiopia Burkina Faso Haiti	■ ▲ ■ ▲ ■ ▲	◆ ◆ ◆

■ Fragile ● Vulnerable ▲ Crisis-affected ◆ Qualitative ▶ Mixed methods

Section 1: Key elements of the co-creation process

Assemble hybrid research team

Include academic researchers and development practitioners.



Conduct research training

Train on decolonial research, co-creation and participatory methods.

Apply a decolonial lens to literature review

Prioritise non-Western scholars and their scholarship. Challenge Eurocentric knowledge production.

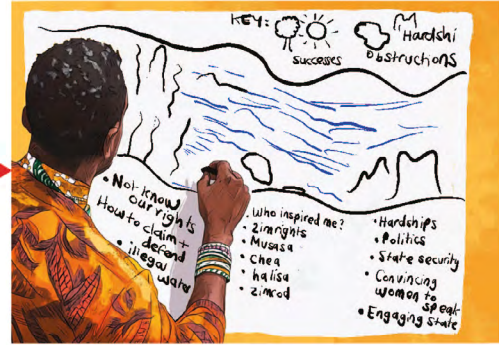


Conduct co-design workshops

Collectively decide on critical elements of the research such as sample group and research sites.

Employ diverse participatory methods

Prioritise hearing directly from community members in their own words.



Co-create research recommendations

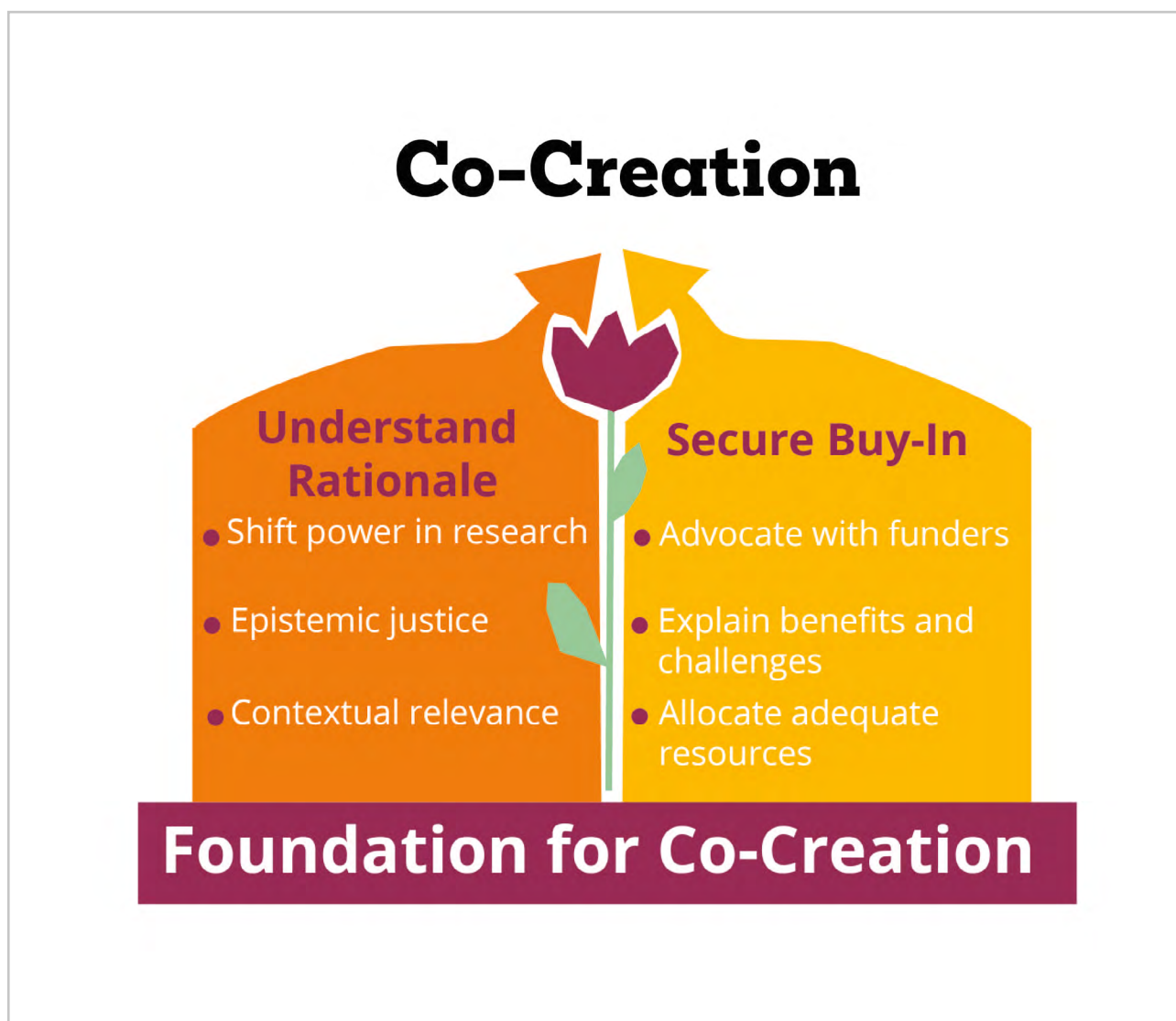
Involve community members and representatives of relevant stakeholder groups.

Use a hybrid ethics panel

Form a panel that can act as a 'critical friend' to review the research tools, ethics protocols and data management plans.



...before you begin



In Christian Aid's experience, the co-creation process was put in place to facilitate the following:

- collective identification of evidence gaps and development of the research questions and research objectives,
- identification of research approach and data collection methods,
- developing a research impact plan.

Before fieldwork

#1. Assemble a hybrid research team

What?

Assemble a team that includes academic researchers and development practitioners to ensure the research maintains academic rigor while being grounded in practice. Cascant Sempere et al (2022) identify this as one of several steps through which power can be shifted in research. This approach is a particularly useful way to do research that is contextually appropriate and can have greater impact (Bollaert et al, 2022).

How?

a) Combine diverse expertise based on these criteria:

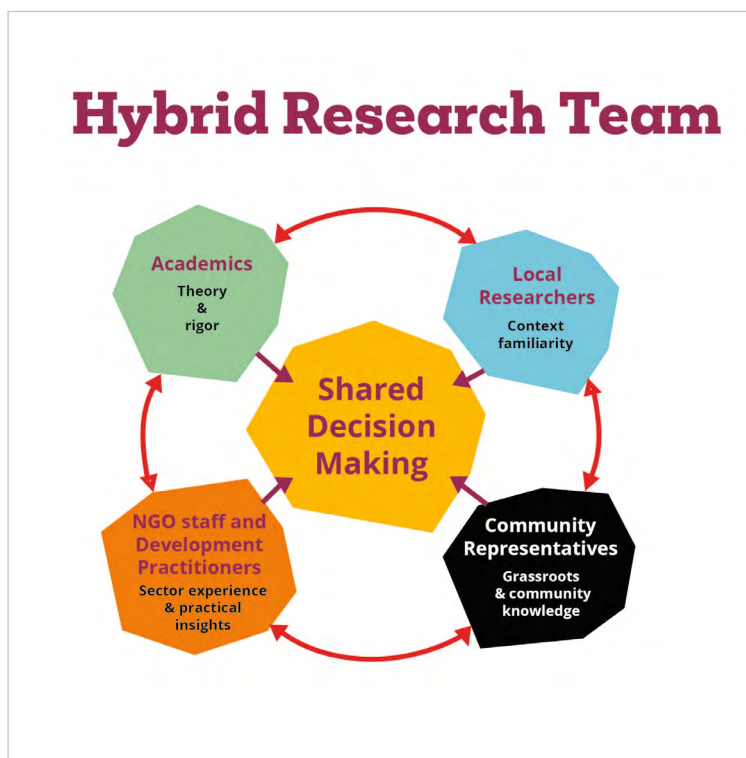
- Theory: Involve academics for theoretical grounding and methodological rigor.
- Sector experience: Involve development practitioners for practical insights and contextual understanding.
- Familiarity with context: Recruit local researchers and consultants familiar with the research context.

b) Ensure representation from partner organisations:

- Include staff from local NGOs and community-based organisations.
- Involve grassroots leaders and community representatives where possible.

c) Consider and actively address power dynamics within the team*:

- Establish clear roles and responsibilities.
- Create mechanisms for shared decision-making.
- Address potential hierarchies or inequalities openly.



Insights from practice

In the three projects, the practitioners were from the Christian Aid country teams and our partner organisations. These practitioners complemented the team by ensuring that the research was grounded in practice and responsive to needs of grassroots women.

* See [our guide](#) on doing research ethically for more suggestions on how you can actively address power relations within the team (section 3.2, p34).

#2. Conceptualise and conduct research training



What?

Offer comprehensive research training that covers decolonial research and unpacks co-creation and participatory methods. Where possible, bespoke trainings should be offered to the hybrid research team to ensure that all knowledge gaps are addressed.

How?

a) Offer training on the following:

- Research design, methods, and analysis.
- Doing research ethically.

b) Integrate a decolonial research praxis:

- Discuss concepts of epistemic justice and power in knowledge production.

c) Focus on co-design processes and participatory methods:

- Train on facilitating co-creation workshops.
- Introduce various participatory research methods (e.g., participatory mapping, photovoice).

d) Include practical exercises and role-playing:

- Allow team members to practise facilitation skills.
- Simulate challenging research scenarios for group problem-solving.

Insights from practice

The Christian Aid Research, Evidence and Learning team offered bespoke research trainings to the research team. These were a compressed form of our Evidence for Development Professionals course, and topics discussed included: key tenants of decolonial research praxis, co-design process, diverse research outputs, participatory methods etc.

#3. Apply a decolonial lens to literature review

What?

This involves prioritising non-Western scholars and their scholarship. Be attentive to who is writing on research themes and where they are from. Use citational practices that challenge Eurocentric knowledge production.

How?

a) Prioritise non-Western scholars and scholarship:

- Actively seek out local and regional academic publications.
- Include grey literature from local organisations and institutions.
- Pay attention to who is writing on research themes and their background.



b) Use citational practices that challenge Eurocentric knowledge production:

- Aim for a diverse range of citations, prioritising marginalised voices.
- Critically examine and challenge dominant narratives in the literature.
- Include sources that are written in languages other than English.

c) Involve local team members in the literature review process:

- Ask for recommendations of relevant local literature.
- Collaboratively analyse and synthesize findings.

Insights from practice

The projects strived to use a decolonial approach to the literature review. The research projects were attentive to who is writing on the research themes and where they are coming from. The desk review/literature review was underpinned by a recognition that there is marginalisation of non-western scholars and their scholarship, and undertaken from a place of respect for them. Citational practices have been highlighted by scholars as a critical tool in challenging Eurocentric knowledge production (Ahmed, 2013, 2014; Todd 2016; Tynan and Bishop 2022). Zoe Todd (2016), an indigenous scholar advocates for dismantling racialised knowledge hierarchies by citing and quoting indigenous thinkers directly and generously. Our thinking behind the literature review resonates strongly with the above scholars and Simpson's (2017) ideas about citational practices. Simpson (*ibid.*) advocates for 'thinking critically about whose voices are centred and whose are marginalised , prioritising indigenous intellectual practices and theories'.

#4. Conduct co-design workshops

What?

Organise co-design workshops with the aim to collectively make decisions on critical elements of the research evidence gap, the research focus, lines of inquiry, methodological choices such as sample group and research sites. Utilise both in-person and online formats as appropriate and involve diverse stakeholders (e.g., government representatives, civil society organisations, grassroots collectives).



How?

a) Ensure diverse stakeholder participation:

- Invite government representatives, civil society organisations, grassroots leaders.
- Consider power dynamics and ensure marginalised groups are well-represented.

b) Use accessible formats:

- Combine in-person and online formats as appropriate.
- Ensure language interpretation if needed is available.
- Choose accessible venues for in-person workshops.

c) Structure workshops for collective decision-making:

- Identify evidence gaps collectively.
- Develop research questions based on community needs.
- Collectively decide on the research approach and data collection methods.

d) Use participatory facilitation techniques:

- Employ small group discussions, plenary sessions, and interactive exercises.
- Use visual aids and participatory tools (e.g., problem trees, stakeholder mapping).

e) Document the co-creation process:

- Take detailed notes or recordings (with consent).
- Capture key decisions and rationales.
- Share summaries with participants for validation.

Insights from practice

The table below outlines the key aspects of the co-design workshops implemented in the three research projects from which this guide draws insights.

Research Projects	Locations	Stakeholders involved in the co-design workshops	Mode of Co-creation	Examples of key decisions made during the co-design workshops
Fostering Gender Just Recoveries: 1. Women's Participation in Public Budgeting and Access to Loan and Credit Financing.	Zimbabwe	Government representatives, civil society organisations, grassroots women and their leaders	In person and online	Lines of inquiry. For example, the following questions were agreed upon: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the level of women's access to budget strategy paper? • What are the mechanisms by which women/women's movements input into the budget cycle?
2. Diagnosis of Gender Responsive Budgeting in Burkina Faso: Practices and Stakeholder Perceptions.	Burkina Faso	Government representatives, civil society organisations, grassroots women and their leaders	In person and online	Identification and selection of the ministries that were relevant to the issues women face.
3. The impact of the downward revision of the Goods and Services Tax and the Limited Access to Finance on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone	Government representatives, civil society organisations, grassroots women and their leaders	In person and online	Practical recommendations. For example, that women in media collective can play an important role in highlighting the economic issues of women.
Addressing impunity for gender-based violence among displaced communities in Haiti	Haiti	Research team, Christian Aid's civil society partner working on GBV, representative from a university in Haiti, community members, policy advisor on GBV	Primarily online	Sampling selection and the application of research ethics. For instance, it was decided that GBV survivors would self-select themselves for the study.
Social Protection Mechanisms and Access to Justice for Vulnerable People in Fragile Contexts	Burkina Faso, Haiti and Ethiopia	Christian Aid's global advisors managing the research project and Christian Aid country teams from Burkina Faso, Haiti and Ethiopia	Primarily online	Lines of inquiry and the existing evidence gap to address. For instance, it was decided that the research should frame questions about the role of indigenous collectives and how they may be strengthened.

Reflexivity and problem solving during the co-design phase of the Fostering Gender-Just Recoveries project in Burkina Faso

The research team working on gender-responsive budgeting in Burkina Faso used reflexivity to think through the methodological decisions. The team carried out a desk review to assess the performance of various ministries on indicators of gender-responsive budgeting, and then brainstormed a sampling strategy based on categorization of performance, developing three categories for ministry performance: good, average and poor. The team considered selecting one to two ministries for each of the three categories.

The team also carried out:

1. a mapping exercise to see where each ministry was located in the performance matrix.
2. a timeline mapping to see which ministries had implemented gender-responsive budgeting – and when – and which were in the pilot phase.

The research contemplated having a sampling strategy which would be informed by our timeline mapping and performance categorisation.

During our brainstorming, we asked ourselves whether this sampling strategy would be relevant to the needs of women? We were unsure. We realised we had to make these sampling decisions collaboratively. We used the co-design workshops to collectively reflect on what our sampling strategy should be. We came up with following two questions and presented them during the co-design workshop:

- 1. Which are the ministries whose work is closest to the everyday lives of grassroots women?**
- 2. Which categories of grassroots women should be the focus of the research?**

We divided the co-creation workshop participants into smaller groups. We asked each group to reflect on these questions and to come up with three ministries which they consider to be closest to the everyday lives of grassroots women and explain why. On similar lines, we asked each group to come up with two categories of women who should be the focus of the research and again to explain why. After the group discussion, each group presented their responses for the two questions to the larger group. Collectively, we discussed the responses of each group and arrived at the four ministries and the two categories of grassroots women which would be the focus of the research. The following tables presents the final Ministries and the categories of grassroots women which the research team and the stakeholders collectively agreed upon.

Selection of Ministries during the Co-design workshop in Burkina Faso

Ministries	Rationale for Selection
Ministry of Gender	Funds women's income-generating activities and puts in place measures to take care of survivors of GBV.
Ministry of Agriculture	Gives subsidy on agricultural equipment and has other schemes for women in this sector.
Ministry of Health	Provides free maternal care and childcare which are very important to women.
Ministry of Territorial Administration and Decentralisation	Has quotas for women so that they can be councillors in municipalities.

The following table presents the categories of grassroots women which we collectively agreed upon.

Selection of Respondent Groups during the Co-design workshop in Burkina Faso

Categories of Grassroots Women	Rationale for Selection
Rural women	Most of them are in the informal sector. They do not have easy access to information. Their participation in decision-making spaces is very limited.
Women in the informal sector	Most women in urban areas, peri-urban and rural areas are in the informal sector. Within the informal sector, most women do gardening and/or agricultural work.



Small Group Discussion during a co-design workshop in Burkina Faso.

During fieldwork

#5. Employ Diverse Participatory Methods

What?

Prioritise hearing directly from community members in their own words. Use storytelling and life history tools to capture lived experiences. Mapping exercises also help create space for community voices.

How?

a) Use participatory methods like storytelling and identity mapping' exercises to capture lived experiences:

- Create safe spaces for sharing narratives.
- Explore multiple identities and how they interact with the research topic.

b) Utilize visual and creative methods:

- Employ 'river of life' exercises to depict journeys related to work, activism etc.
- Use photography or drawing to explore research themes.

c) Adapt methods to local contexts:

- Work with local team members to modify methods as needed.
- Be open to incorporating local ways of sharing knowledge.



Insights from practice

During the co-design phase of the research in Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone, we encountered several moments that required deep listening, learning, and sharing of experiences with the research participants. We also experienced powerful instances of togetherness that embodied the concept of decolonial love as an act of solidarity (refer to the [co-creation principles](#)). To fully embrace these moments and deepen our decolonial praxis, we used various participatory methods. Some of these methods are described on the next page.

Storytelling

The co-creation process for the research component in 'Fostering Gender Just Recoveries' project gave spaces for grassroots women and women leaders to tell their stories in their own words, articulate their problems, and offer their own analysis of issues. Their stories show the intersections between various themes and its multifaceted impacts on women's lives. A woman leader from Burkina Faso explains the linkages between the conflict situation in Burkina Faso and the safety situation and economic status of women in the following extract:

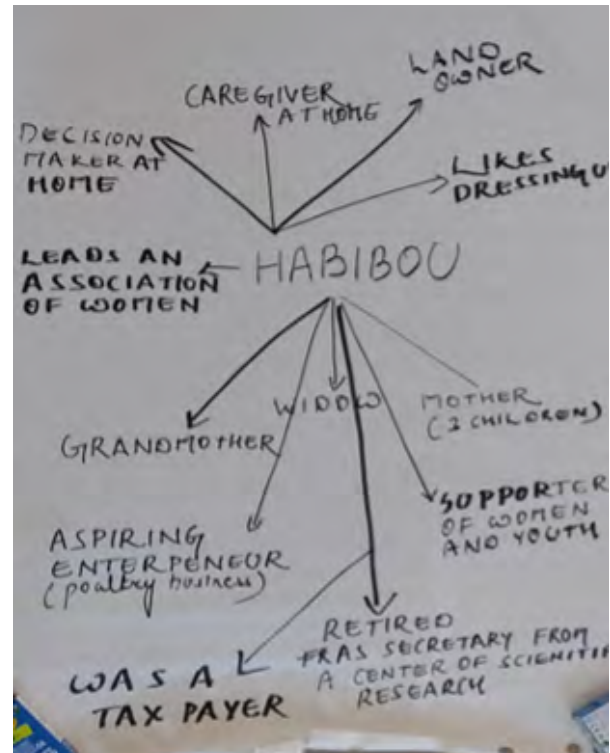
'I am a leader of a woman's association in Burkina Faso. I am concerned about the impact of the conflict situation on women in Burkina Faso. Women are suffering due to the conflict situation. The state is not focused on development planning. Everything is focused on security. People are afraid. Women and girls do not feel safe. Women who are internally displaced are more vulnerable to gender-based violence.

The security situation impacts the economic status of women. Women petty traders do not find a clientele easily as the conflict situation has made households more vulnerable economically and hence purchasing ability is low. The main focus of many households is to be food secure as they know the situation is uncertain and may change anytime. It is very hard to lead a women's association. I often feel like giving up. However, other women from the community and association encourage me not to give up.

(A woman leader who described herself as a widow, mother, entrepreneur and a leader of a women's association in Burkina Faso)

Identity mapping

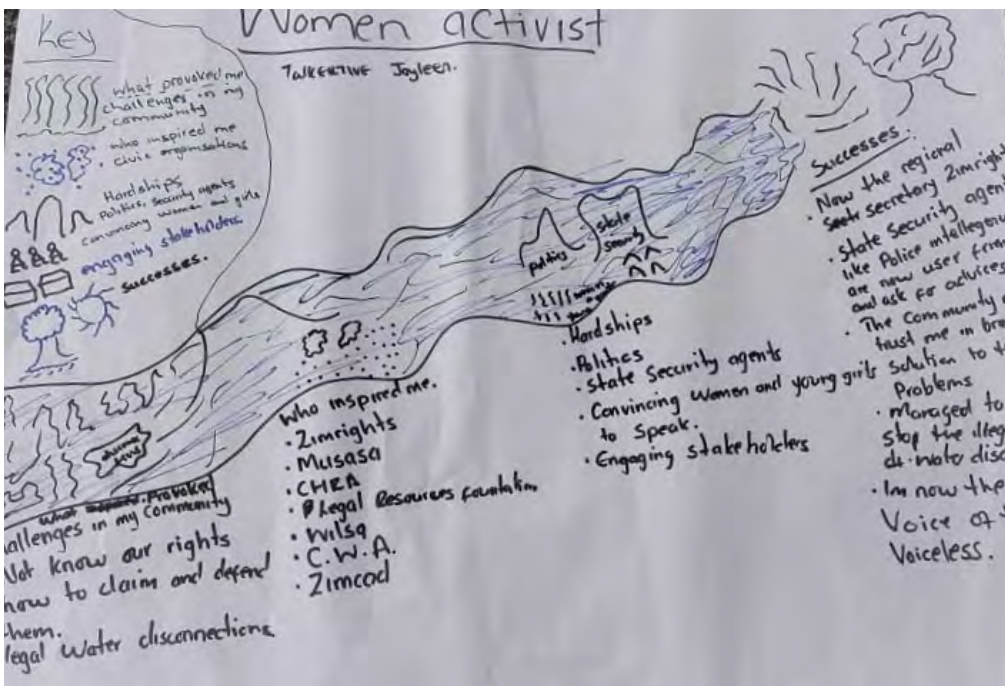
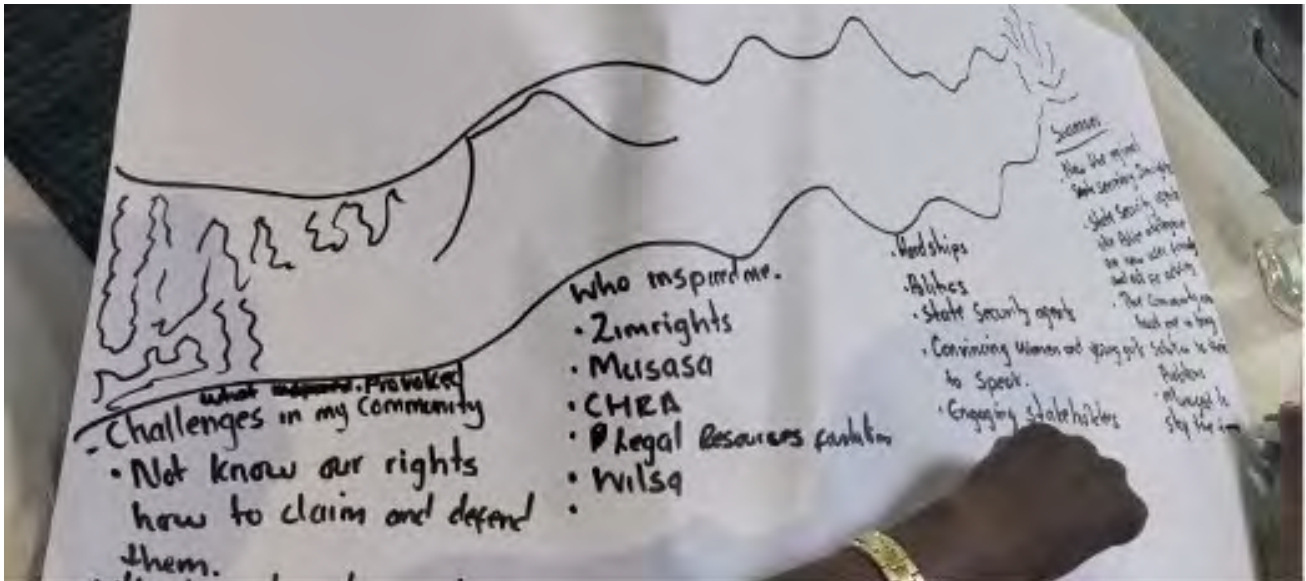
During the co-design workshop, participants mapped their multiple identities, revealing the complexity of lived experiences and this informed sampling strategy.



The multiple identities of Madame Habibou from Burkina Faso.

River of life method

The pictures below depict the life journeys of two women activists from Zimbabwe



It is important to practice reflexivity throughout the process. This means continuously questioning research decisions, being open to changing course based on collective reflections and seek to openly address power dynamics, creating opportunities for less powerful stakeholders to influence decisions.

#6. Co-create research recommendations



What?

Involve respondent groups and representatives of relevant stakeholder groups in developing recommendations, ensuring that recommendations reflect local needs and perspectives.

How?

a) Involve respondent groups and representatives of relevant stakeholders in formulating recommendations:

- Hold a participatory workshop to generate initial recommendations.
- Use validation workshops to refine recommendations.

b) Ensure recommendations reflect local needs and perspectives:

- Cross-check recommendations against originally identified community needs.
- Consider the feasibility and potential impacts in the local context.

Insights from practice

Research validation and dissemination workshops should prioritise community voices and actively involve research respondents in shaping the recommendations. The Burkina Faso validation workshop for the gender-responsive budgeting research project was designed as a dialogical space where draft recommendations were reviewed and discussed by the research team, respondent groups, and other key stakeholders. Its feedback was used to enhance the quality of the research report, particularly in refining the recommendations. This collaborative process strengthened the credibility of the final recommendations.

Before, during and after field work

#7. Use hybrid ethics panels

What?

Form a panel that can act as a 'critical friend' to review the research tools, ethics protocols, and data management plans. The panel should constitute of a mix of academic and community level stakeholders. This ensures ethical considerations are contextually appropriate.



How?

a) Form a panel that can act as a 'critical friend':

- Research ethics expert, community leaders, and representatives from diverse stakeholder groups.
- Ensure diverse perspectives are represented on the panel.

b) Have the panel review key documents:

- Submit research protocols, tools, and data management plans for review.
- Present the co-creation process for ethical consideration.

c) Ensure ethical considerations are context-appropriate:

- Discuss local norms and values around research ethics.
- Address potential conflicts between institutional and local ethical standards.

d) Create a mechanism for ongoing ethical guidance:

- Establish a process for consulting the panel throughout the research.
- Hold regular check-ins to address emerging ethical issues.

Insights from practice

The hybrid ethics panel we constituted for GBV impunity research study reviewed the research tools, ethics protocol, participant information sheet, and data management plan, providing the role of a critical friend. A critical friend is someone who can ask difficult questions using critical thinking to evaluate a situation. The panel provided ethical leadership and ensured the research was appropriate to the context, critical to enhancing the impact of the research.

Hybrid ethics panel

- ✓ 1 GBV survivor from the community
- ✓ 1 GBV survivor from the community
- ✓ 1 policy advisor on GBV at the Ministry on the Status and Rights of Women
- ✓ 1 civil society representative
- ✓ 1 academic
- ✓ 1 GBV specialist

A decolonising approach to ethics in development research focuses on addressing power dynamics throughout the research and evaluation process. It acknowledges that both the researcher and the subjects of study (whether people, institutions, or systems) are affected by colonial histories. This recognition challenges the idea of a single, universal standard for ethics in research. As a result, there is increasing awareness within the research community about how ethics are influenced by colonial and racial biases. Scholars and practitioners are now calling for a rethinking of ethics in development research to better account for power imbalances. The key questions are: **'How can ethics in research shift power?'** and **'Whose ethics counts in research?'**

Section 2

Considerations

Co-creation should prioritise diverse voices and knowledge systems. It is therefore important to continually ask: How can we make co-creation spaces more inclusive? Yet, achieving inclusivity can be challenging due to various factors. These should be considered when planning to use the co-creation approach in your research.

1. Conflict and Fragile contexts:

Research settings prone to conflict present unique challenges to the co-creation process due to their uncertainty and volatility of such environments. As experienced in our Burkina Faso and Haiti research, these challenges include limited stakeholder participation at both the community and state levels, often caused by travel restrictions and general fear. Additionally, the selection of research sites is constrained by the need to prioritise the safety of the research team, resulting in a preference for locations where travel poses fewer risks.

2. Barriers between the research stakeholders:

This highlights the importance of creating space for research stakeholders with diverse worldviews to engage in shared learning, reflection, and accountability. Without careful planning, there is a risk that the needs and perspectives of communities may be overshadowed by development practitioners from partner NGOs. To avoid this, it is crucial to identify and address language barriers, allocate time for listening, and use participatory methods. This process also requires a strong commitment to the principles of co-creation.

3. Funding ecosystem:

Co-creation is time consuming and does not lend itself to the funding ecosystem's emphasis on definitive timelines. Rather, research funders would need to allow for flexible timelines that allow meaningful participation.

Best practice

These are our recommendations for ensuring that co-creation spaces are more inclusive:

1. Be adaptable

a) Prioritise safety and security:

- Conduct risk assessments for all research activities.
- Develop clear security protocols and emergency procedures.

b) Be flexible with research design:

- Have multiple options for research sites based on security situations.
- Be prepared to adapt data collection methods if needed.

c) Develop contingency plans for stakeholder participation:

- Consider alternative ways to involve stakeholders who cannot travel.
- Use technology creatively to facilitate remote participation.

d) Address potential biases and limitations:

- Discuss how conflict might influence the research process and findings.
- Be transparent about these challenges in research outputs.

2. Prioritise diverse voices and knowledge systems

a) Overcome language barriers:

- Budget for professional interpretation and translation.
- Produce research materials in multiple languages.

b) Create inclusive online spaces:

- Choose accessible online platforms.
- Provide technical support for those less familiar with digital tools.

c) Recognise and value different forms of knowledge:

- Create space for oral traditions, indigenous knowledge systems.
- Consider how to integrate non-textual forms of knowledge into the research.

d) Allow extra time for inclusive processes:

- Build in additional time for translation, explanation, and consensus-building.
- Resist pressure to rush the co-creation process.

3. Bridge indigenous and Western knowledge systems

a) Create partnerships between indigenous and scholarly communities.

- Involve representatives of indigenous communities in the decision making process.
- Use participatory methods for data collection.

b) Use workshops for multiple purposes:

- Combine data collection with collaborative analysis and problem-solving.
- Create opportunities for mutual learning between researchers and communities.

c) Develop innovative research outputs:

- Explore creative ways to present findings (e.g., community theater, podcasts)
- Ensure outputs are accessible and meaningful to all stakeholders

4. Focus on inclusive dissemination

a) Hold validation workshops in accessible locations:

- Choose venues close to research sites when possible.
- Provide transportation support for community participants.

b) Create multiple knowledge products:

- Develop a range of outputs for different audiences (e.g., policy briefs, community reports).
- Produce materials in local languages and accessible formats.

c) Budget for inclusive dissemination:

- Allocate funds for community participant travel to dissemination events.
- Consider innovative dissemination methods (e.g., community radio programs).

d) Facilitate community ownership of findings:

- Support communities to use the research in their own advocacy efforts.
- Discuss data ownership and sharing early in the process.

5. Embrace “decolonial love” in the research process

a) Foster moments of togetherness:

- Create informal spaces for team bonding and shared experiences.
- Recognise and celebrate collective achievements.

b) Practice deep listening and mutual learning:

- Create opportunities for all team members to share their knowledge and perspectives.
- Acknowledge and address mistakes or misunderstandings openly.

c) Be open to local customs and practices:

- Respect and participate in local traditions when invited.
- Be willing to step outside comfort zones to build genuine connections.

d) Sustain relationships beyond the research:

- Discuss ways to maintain connections after the project ends.
- Consider how the research can contribute to long-term community goals.

Additional tips

1. Prioritise diverse voices and knowledges throughout the process.
2. Use workshops for multiple purposes - data collection, problem-solving, and validation.
3. Hold validation workshops in research sites when possible to ensure community participation.
4. Create multiple knowledge products in local languages for different audiences.
5. Build in time for deep listening, learning, and experience sharing among the team.
6. Practice “decolonial love” – create moments of solidarity and shared experience.

Remember: Co-creation is an iterative and often messy process. It requires patience, flexibility, and a genuine commitment to sharing power and valuing diverse knowledge systems. While it may take more time and resources upfront, co-creation can lead to more relevant, ethical, and impactful research in international development contexts.

Conclusion

Co-creation leads to richer insights which can be used to make conceptual, methodological and ethical decisions about the research, nuanced and contextually relevant research and recommendations, and more sustainable development solutions. While challenging, it is a powerful approach for shifting power dynamics and centring community knowledge in research.

As you implement co-creation, continually reflect on:

- Who gets to know the world?
- Who gets to shape the world?
- Who or what is silent or silenced?

The process requires a continuous practice of reflexivity where you continuously question research decisions and are open to changing course based on collective reflections.

By embracing co-creation, we can work towards truly decolonial and community-centered research practices in international development. It is hoped that this learning from these projects will inspire and challenge the practice of decolonial approaches to research with marginalised communities in the global South.

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