

# USERS

# Putting Users' Voices at the Heart of Evaluation



Prepared by

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# Introducing TSIC USERS

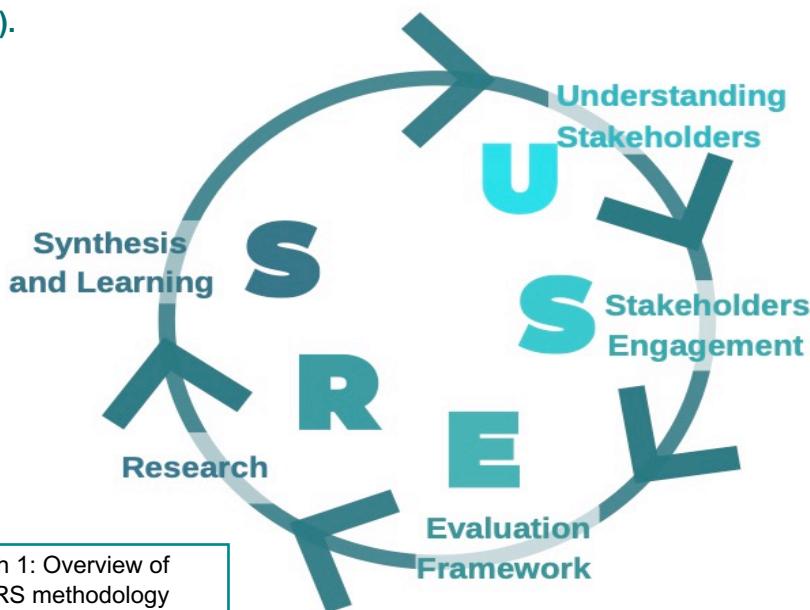
USERS is a methodology for Inclusive Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) that 1) brings diverse voices, especially user voices; 2) creates value for all stakeholders; and 3) upholds the balance of power among stakeholders.

Following TSIC's publication of ["Inclusion of User Voices"](#), the aim of the USERS methodology is to provide practical guidance on co-producing MEL. Through co-production, funders and organisations reshape their processes and methodology in a way that fundamentally modifies the power dynamics among the three main groups of stakeholders - funders, organisations and end users. The lack of physical and cognitive diversity among funders and leaders within social sector organisations mean that decision-makers seldom come from backgrounds which reflect lived realities of the end users. The latter have often been left with little to no influence in decision-making and unable to define the projects they are supposed to benefit from. Finally, data and evidence often go 'up' from the end users to the funders in forms of grant reports (upward accountability), but they rarely trickle back down to the users (downward accountability). Broadly speaking, MEL has been done in an extractive manner with little to no value to the end users; and is only inclusive of end users when data is required from them rather than throughout the MEL journey.

Moving towards inclusive MEL and co-production is important not only from an ethical and moral view point, it also makes for better evaluation. Since they are experiencing the desired changes (or absence thereof) in their lives and communities, users' perspectives should inform the MEL process in all its dimensions – from planning to data analysis and learnings. On top of that, user voices can represent an invaluable source of innovative ideas. Inclusive MEL is not an entirely new concept – it is built on important work of [Democratic Evaluation](#), which posits the aim of the evaluation to serve the whole community; and [Empowerment Evaluation](#), which increases capacity of stakeholders to evaluate their own programmes.

"Voice and Inclusion" is included as one of the [five Bond Principles](#) for assessing the quality of evidence, alongside appropriateness, triangulation, contribution and transparency. There are two main features of the USERS methodology to achieve inclusive MEL: i) it is intentional in addressing the power imbalances that we recognise exist in any social interventions; ii) it is embedded throughout the whole MEL cycle.

**This methodology is organised around five steps in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL).**



Graph 1: Overview of USERS methodology

## The 5-step approach

- Stakeholders are key! The first two steps therefore are explicitly focused on them.
- The five steps do not flow in a linear way, but form an iterative cycle. They can also happen simultaneously.

# 1. Understanding Stakeholders

The first step is to understand and acknowledge existing power dynamics between funders, organisation, and end users.

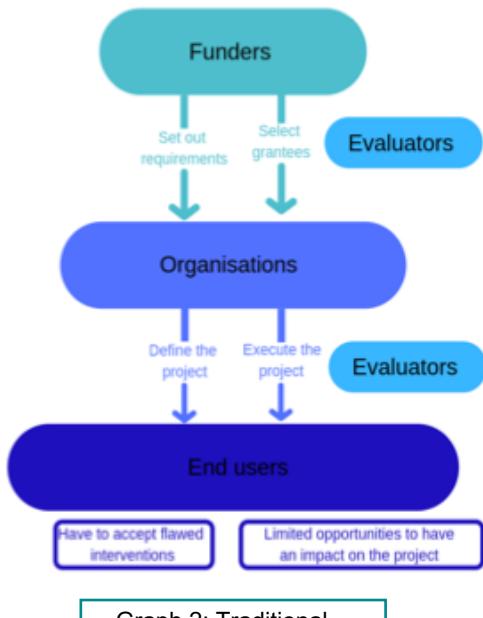
For inclusive MEL to take place, a fundamental shift in **power dynamics** ought to take place. The first step is to recognise how power dynamics are like for your project or programme.

**Funders** are at the top of graphic (on the right), since their role as decision-makers on which organisations will receive funds traditionally allow them to operate from a position of power.

**Organisations** are represented in the middle of the graphic. They are the recipients of funds and as such are obliged to comply with funders' requirements; but they also have the power to shape projects in terms of how they will be executed.

Depending on how evaluation is commissioned, **evaluators** may be between funders and organisations, or between organisations and end users.

**End users** are typically at the bottom of this graph. While they benefit from funders' and organisations' work, they have very limited control over the projects. Interventions have to be considered at each level, based on the collective vision of participation. Graph 3 illustrates the various definitions - aim for co-production but also acknowledge that it is a journey to get there.



Graph 2: Traditional power dynamics.



## Who should be in charge?

- Funders and organisations

**Identify stakeholders and facilitate an agreement on collective vision of participation:** the relevant and a fair representation of stakeholders within the organisation and among users should be identified at the start of a project. Using the [Users Matrix](#) will help you make sure that diverse types of users are involved. Then, get the stakeholders to agree on a collective vision of participation. **If it is not possible to shift the power dynamics among stakeholders, co-production may not be appropriate.**

## Co-production in practice: what you should do at this stage

### 1 Appoint a Monitoring Champion

among stakeholders, to coordinate, organise and assess co-production

#### All stakeholders

**Assess Knowledge, Skills, Attitude (KSA) and Availability:** some participants' knowledge of MEL may be limited, some may have weaker communication skills or have communication barriers, and some may hold mistrust towards research (attitudes) – see the [Kaizen Co-production Readiness Tool](#) as an example. In addition, it is also important to recognise that stakeholders may have different availabilities, especially end users in living in marginalised contexts.

Graph 3: Co-production Ladder. Adapted from [thinklocalactpersonal](#).

## 2. Stakeholders Management

Including end users in MEL can be challenging, especially when it comes to hard-to-reach populations living far from funders and organisation's headquarters.

- **All stakeholders**

**Co-plan resources allocation:** as inclusive MEL involves bringing together many stakeholders and ensuring that communities have the capacity to be part of the process, the success of co-production resides in careful budget planning. Consider costs required to compensate for stakeholders' involvement and accessibility requirements.

**Co-define how users will be involved:** it is important to determine how they will be included from the outset. This includes how users will communicate with funders and organisations, when they will do so, and how their input will be acted upon. Drafting a "["Co-production Plan"](#)" outlining these different steps might increase organisations and funders commitment, and can respect the willingness and availability to commit from the users. At this stage, it is important to consider diverse ways for users to engage and participate and identify the most suitable processes.

**Co-define stakeholders' responsibilities and principles of engagement:** be clear about the type of input you expect from stakeholders - what, when, how and from whom. It is important that stakeholders realise it is their responsibility to actively participate in planning, designing and conducting MEL. Based on these responsibilities, a set of principles of engagement could be formulated – as shared principles and values to guide the MEL journey (see "[Example Principles](#)").

**Co-production in practice: what you should do at this stage**

2

**Organise focus groups (which should be a representative sample!)**

to understand challenges in local communities and gaps in existing projects and processes which are limiting co-production

- **Funders and organisations**

**Design the project's lifecycle with stages and gates:** co-production is more than gathering users' feedback – it is about sharing power. One of the ways to organise co-production in MEL is to structure the project in stages and gates. While stages represent tasks that have to be carried out over a certain period of time (e.g., data analysis), gates are moments when decisions need to be taken for the project to move forward. Identifying moments when stakeholders need to come together and reach a decision makes the process more transparent and ensures stakeholders know when their input is needed.

**Put in solutions to address gaps/barriers:** by now, the barriers to co-production should be clear, be it attitudinal, physical and communicational. Funders and organisations – with more resources at their disposal – should actively consider and implement solutions to address those barriers.



This stage might involve **risks** that organisations and funders should bear in mind:

- This process might amplify class differences and make the less educated feel more vulnerable, as their voices could be shadowed by those of more educated people who can easily express their views and impose them as those of the whole community. Skilled facilitators are required who can handle complex power dynamics, and to confront conscious and unconscious bias in groups.
- Differences in stakeholder's values, needs and expectations might emerge, in which case a process for reconciling differences and resolving tensions would be needed.
- Do not promise more than what you can deliver as part of expectations management.

### 3. Evaluation Framework Design

The evaluation framework will help clarify the link between impact, outcomes and data captured for the evaluation.

- **All stakeholders**

**Co-produce a common vision of change and impact:** this contributes to improved communication and work efficiency, and aligns stakeholders' understanding. The Theory of Change, a methodology to describe how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context, can be a good place to start. It will give stakeholders the opportunity to voice their expectations and assumptions, thereby uncovering potential disagreements. It also allows an organisation to identify the most relevant outcomes as well as any unexpected or negative consequences of its theory of change that should be closely monitored.

**Identify and prioritise the most relevant outcomes:** asking users to identify the most relevant outcomes ensures that the framework is not built entirely on the assumptions of funders or organisations. As a large number of outcomes might come out of this process, you may need to ask users to rank their outcomes in order of importance, relevance and ease of collection, or other criteria which matter to the users.

**Validate and test the framework:** once the framework has been designed, allow for time (at least 1 month) to validate and test the framework. In this process you may find out that some indicators are unclear, unnecessary, impractical, etc. It would also be hard to achieve a consensus among all stakeholders, and the evaluator needs to consider potential trade-offs in balancing stakeholders' inputs in coming up with the final framework.

**Co-production in practice: what you should do at this stage**

- 3** Organise **Action Learning Sets** (a structured method enabling small groups to address complicated issues by meeting regularly) to define relevant outcomes

- **End users and organisation**

**Identify indicators and data collection methods:** once the outcomes are agreed, we ask stakeholders to identify relevant indicators (qualitative and quantitative) and related data collection methods. Participatory methods such as action learning sets, photovoice, semi-structured interviews and ethnography are particularly useful in this context.

When selecting data collection tools, organisations should pay attention to accessibility requirements and ease of use for end users.

**!** This stage might involve **risks** that organisations and funders should bear in mind:

- Responding to all stakeholders' demands might compromise the timeliness of the framework creation. Valid and reliable evaluation does not equate consensus.
- The evaluators do have the power to decide which feedback to incorporate, and considering that they may also be biased, it is important to agree on assessment criteria in stage 2, be transparent about stakeholders' feedback (though anonymised) through mechanisms such as a feedback tracker, and catalogue how feedback is handled.
- Stakeholders may need to be trained on basic MEL terminologies before being able to contribute meaningfully; but at the same time, evaluators should be mindful of using simple language instead of complicated MEL jargon.

## 4. Research (Data Planning, Collection, Analysis)

Collecting and analysing data to measure impact, especially when done according to co-production principles, requires a combination of rigour, flexibility and creativity to adapt to diverse contexts and challenges.

- **All stakeholders**

**Plan frequency and date of collection:** in consultation with stakeholders and depending on the kind of data and the nature of the project, we establish a schedule of collection. Collate and analyse results as frequently as possible to identify any key trend in data collection. This will allow any obvious problems to be identified and addressed as quickly as possible. Consider using MEL systems or apps that produce real time reporting, enabling constant feedback loops among stakeholders. However, be aware that using technology tools might hamper the evaluation process if users or staff are not comfortable using them.

- **End users and organisations**

**Identify relevant sources:** stakeholders collecting data should identify the right groups of individuals from whom the data will be collected (also known as sampling). This involves considering who and where users are and setting up a representative sample.

**Create data collection tools:** surveys, guides for qualitative data collection or other tools should be presented to end users and their feedback.

### Co-production in practice: what you should do at this stage

4

#### Train some users in data collection and analysis

through peer training, using participatory methods such as photo voice

**Data collection:** where possible, data collection can be conducted by members of local communities and end users themselves, with the help of frontline staff. Peer-led research methods are particularly helpful. End users are likely to make peers feel more comfortable during the process and are able to identify the reasons behind a lack of participation. If staff members of the organisation collect data, they should do so in a way that reflects a deep knowledge of local communities.

**Data analysis:** where possible, users can be involved in data analysis; otherwise, the Monitoring Champion will present results to users and gather their feedback.



This stage might involve **risks** that organisations and funders should bear in mind:

- When collecting and analysing data, it is essential to be context-driven to understand the cultural environment in which the evaluation takes place.
- Organisations may be eager to co-produce and there is a risk that some users may feel coerced into co-producing. Stress that participation is voluntary and will not affect users' access to services.
- To ensure that co-production is implemented throughout this phase, the evaluator plays a central role. Consider putting in Key Performance Indicators, and the party commissioning the evaluation may ask for feedback from stakeholders on the evaluator's performance.

## 5. Synthesis and Learning

Synthesis and learning should not only take place at the end of a project cycle – but throughout the project to ensure a more responsive approach to project implementation.

- **All stakeholders**

**Identify areas of improvements in the Monitoring and Evaluation process:** now that the evaluation coming to an end, it is time to reflect on the Monitoring and Evaluation plan. All stakeholders should meet and discuss what they liked or disliked during the the process, including their ability to be heard and have their perspectives taken into account.

**Take negative feedback from vulnerable participants very seriously:** based on the assumption that vulnerable people are less likely to express negative opinions, their voices should be weighted more when they do. Paying particular attention to vulnerable users' opinions also help identify and mitigate negative outcomes of the project.

- **Organisation and end users**

**Identify gaps in the data and challenges in data collection:** based on the results of the first analysis and the experience of data collection. This step can be facilitated by creating a survey for field staff and users or organising a workshop with individuals reporting for their groups.

**Create a final review:** based on analysis of the data and limitations in data collection, create a the final report describing the impact of the programme. The findings should be conveyed in a simple and engaging way to avoid discouraging users without professional training in Monitoring and Evaluation. Findings should be discussed with end users before presenting to funders or external stakeholders. Make sure to remove any jargons or too complex data visualisation. Best practice to appeal to a wide audience is to include the voice of end users in the forms of stories or videos.

**Integrate learning into the next Monitoring and Evaluation Plan:** to make sure that learnings from this cycle will inform the next one, include a list of recommendations that will be implemented.

**Co-production in practice:** what you should do at this stage

5

**Get users' feedback**

on the MEL process (as inclusive MEL is often a new experience, and it is important to know what can be improved, and what value it has added)

 This stage might involve **risks** that organisations and funders should bear in mind:

- Usually, the evaluation may have to meet a certain deadline, and this phase gets completed in a very rushed manner – or parts of it do not get done. It is therefore important to plan ahead and leave ample of buffer to ensure that this phase gets the attention it deserves.
- Communicating learnings requires change in organisational and sector culture, especially as some of the best learnings come from failures. This goes back to the beginning of USERS – co-defining principles and collective vision.
- Making impact findings accessible is important, and given the wide range of stakeholders' requirements, impact findings may need to be presented in a few different formats.

# Putting into Practice

The USERS methodology aims to help practitioners implement inclusive MEL, especially using co-production. We look forward to your feedback on how USERS can be improved over time.

USERS is an inclusive approach with participation from all stakeholders. But we also recognise that it is not a blanket approach to evaluation. So, **when is this methodology useful, and when not?** You may start with thinking about these questions:

- Do you have the resources to do it properly? If not, it won't be useful – half-hearted participation may expose end users to more risks than no participation.
- Do you have time? If not (such as in emergency contexts), it won't be useful, as it takes time for stakeholders to resolve differences and work collectively.
- Does your programme require a lot of lived experience to succeed? In social change, usually the answer to this is yes, but some programmes may rely more on technical expertise (e.g. medical or engineering expertise). If the answer is yes, then USERS should be useful to access insights from people with lived experience.
- Is the group of stakeholders too vulnerable/ are lots of politics involved in the context of the programme? If yes, USERS may not be useful. USERS is only useful when you can reconfigure the power dynamics among stakeholders so that they are on more equal footing than previously.
- Do you have the buy-in/ is there the willingness to contribute from stakeholders? If no, USERS will certainly not be useful. Depending on the context, some projects may face 'participation fatigue' and stakeholders may not be interested to participate in such an exercise.

It is also important to stress that this inclusive MEL approach does not run counter to the 'traditional' virtues of good MEL, i.e. objectivity, quality, reliability, timeliness, ethical, free of bias.

As we move forward with encouraging more adoption of inclusive MEL approach, we would love to find out if this contributes to better evaluation outcomes. For example, in inclusive evaluation, the end users – often called 'beneficiaries' – are able to describe the real changes they are going through, instead of saying simply what the delivery organisation or the funder wants to hear, thereby improving the validity and reliability of the evaluation. We would love to hear from you as you apply this in your evaluation practices. E-mail us at [info@tsiconsultancy.com!](mailto:info@tsiconsultancy.com)

## Acknowledgments:

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# Tools

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## Co-production Plan

	Who is involved	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5
Activities	e.g. Diversity Champion, project coordinator from organization and founders	e.g. Skype meeting with Diversity Champions	e.g. Meeting to create Co-production plan and resources allocation			
Budget						

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## Users Matrix

Types of users	Activities: Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5 e
e.g. Women with HIV	e.g. Focus Group	e.g. Action Learning sets			
e.g. Men with HIV	e.g. Focus Group	e.g. Action Learning sets			
e.g. Nurses	(need to be included)	(need to be included)			



Fill in the table with (1) types of users and (2) activities in which they are involved for each step of the MEL process

## Further Resources

1. [Kaizen's Co-production Readiness](#)
2. [The TAAP \(Transforming Agency, Access and Power\) Toolkit](#)
3. [Co-production self-assessment tool: a working reflection tool for practitioners](#)
4. [Evaluating co-production and measuring impact, Co-production network for Wales](#)
5. Use of youth leadership model at Restless Development: p.9 of [their Accountability Report](#)
6. Stakeholders (including affected populations in five countries) assessment of CBM through the Core Humanitarian Standard self-assessment process: p.25 of [their Accountability Report](#)
7. Pieces of advice from Zurich Insurance on [how to manage risk when co-producing services](#)

# Tools

## Bond's Principles – Voice and Inclusion

		1	2	3	4
		Weak evidence	Minimum standard of evidence	Good standard of evidence	Gold standard evidence
1. Voice and Inclusion	1a. Are the perspectives of beneficiaries included in the evidence?	No beneficiary perspectives presented	Beneficiary perspectives presented, but not integrated into analysis	Beneficiary perspectives presented and integrated into analysis	<b>Beneficiary perspectives presented and integrated into analysis, and beneficiaries have validated the findings; the evidence is strongly grounded in the voices of the poor</b>
	1b. Are the perspectives of the most excluded and marginalised groups included in the evidence?	Perspectives from most excluded groups not presented clearly	Perspectives from most excluded groups presented clearly, but not integrated into analysis	Perspectives from most excluded groups presented clearly and integrated into analysis	<b>Perspectives from most excluded groups presented clearly and integrated into analysis, and excluded groups have validated the findings; the evidence is strongly grounded in the voices of the most excluded</b>
	1c. Are the findings disaggregated according to sex, disability and other relevant social differences?	No disaggregation of findings by social differences	Findings are disaggregated, but a number of social differences relevant to the intervention are missing	Findings are disaggregated according to all social differences relevant to the intervention	<b>Findings are disaggregated according to all social differences relevant to the intervention, and why these have been chosen has been clearly explained</b>
	1d. Did beneficiaries play an active role in the assessment process?	Beneficiaries had no involvement in the assessment process	Beneficiaries actively participated in the process and had involvement in one of the following: (1) designing the process (2) analysing the data (3) formulating the conclusions	Beneficiaries actively participated in the process and had involvement in two of the following: (1) designing the process (2) analysing the data (3) formulating the conclusions	<b>Beneficiaries had involvement in all of the following: (1) designing the process (2) analysing the data (3) formulating the conclusions</b>

## Example Principles

- **Alignment:** Before start of the work, decide together how we are going to work and what will make it successful, then stick to it.
- **Sharing power and Equality:** Create the expectation that grantees and end users will be meaningfully involved in every aspect of development of the framework. Learn to share power with stakeholders who are less familiar with evaluation.
- **Do No Harm:** It is essential that participating in the evaluation will not pose any harm or danger to any of the participants, or jeopardise any funding decisions.
- **Withhold judgment:** The evaluator, while having research questions in mind that we want answered, should be open to new ideas and opinions that come up during the process.
- **Collective solutions:** The evaluator should avoid taking responsibility for solving every problem but rather allow the group to find collective solutions..