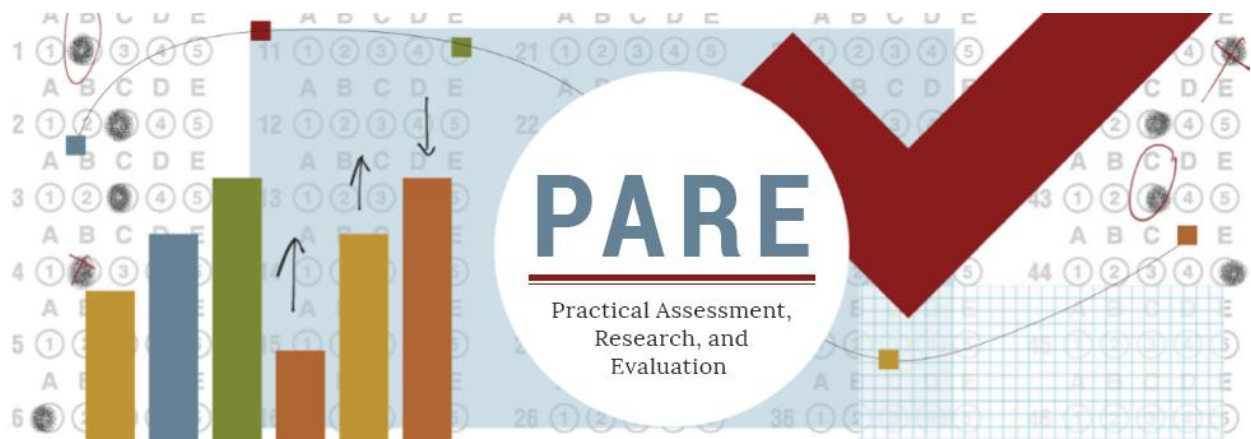




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Evaluation in Time of Chaos: Bridging Theory and Practice of Culturally Responsive Evaluation in Conflict Zones with Focus on Child-Centered Methodologies

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Abstract: This article integrates theoretical foundations with practical field experience to examine three innovative methods that have proven effective in child-centered evaluations: Photo Monitoring (known as photovoice), Playful Focus Groups, and Mind Maps. Drawing from 18 years of evaluation experience in conflict zones, including Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Ukraine, combined with comprehensive research from twenty-three peer-reviewed studies, this analysis demonstrates how culturally responsive evaluation approaches can be effectively implemented in challenging humanitarian contexts. Child-centered methodologies not only generate more accurate evaluation findings but also build community trust and enhance intervention impact in conflict-affected settings. The key findings include quantitative evidence of improved critical thinking skills through mind mapping (Polat & Aydın, 2020), qualitative evidence of enhanced resilience understanding through photo-Monitoring (Barrington et al., 2017), and practical lessons from implementing these approaches with children aged 6-18 in Syria and Palestine.

Keywords: Child-centered evaluation; Conflict zones; Culturally responsive evaluation; Participatory research; Photovoice; Focus groups, Mind mapping

Introduction

Cultural responsiveness in evaluation is a critical evaluation framework used in diverse contexts and aims at centering cultural values and beliefs at the heart of any evaluation effort, (Hood et al., 2015). To implement this framework, evaluators should be culturally competent, which means being ready to understand and adjust their evaluation methods and approaches to the context and acquire the right tools and skills to adapt to a unique environment and culture (American Evaluation Association, 2011).

Culturally responsive evaluation usually attracts buy-in from evaluation populations and increases acceptance, leading to greater responsiveness and willingness to engage in evaluation processes (Hood et al., 2015; Frierson et al., 2002). Furthermore, such approach prevents evaluators from imposing their own

cultural beliefs and assumptions on evaluation findings while ensuring that underrepresented groups are not excluded from assessing interventions (Hopson, 2003; SenGupta et al., 2004).

Conflict zones are one of those contexts where traditional evaluation approaches often fail to capture the complexity of children's and adults' experiences. This is where cultural responsiveness comes in handy (Hassnain et al., 2021). Cultural competence in conflict zones means acquiring a detailed, politically informed, anthropological understanding of the social, cultural, economic, and political structures and processes within the project environment (Jean, I. et al., 2019). This approach requires a deep understanding of evaluation respondents, including their traditions, beliefs, languages, and lived experiences (SenGupta et al., 2004).

The Middle East and other regions have experienced multiple conflicts and wars in the past decade, leading to the displacement of diverse populations and creating complex evaluation contexts that require sophisticated, culturally responsive approaches. There is a need to have an evaluation approach that is effective in capturing children's experiences while respecting their developmental capacities and cultural contexts (Montreuil et al., 2021). This article draws on more than 18 years of practical experience as an evaluator working across diverse conflict zones, during which I conducted dozens of program evaluations focused on children's wellbeing in complex and dangerous environments. The purpose of this article is to provide evaluation practitioners with adaptable tools for use in war-affected settings—tools that have demonstrated their effectiveness in yielding robust evaluation results. Specifically, this paper examines three child-centered evaluation methodologies: Photo Monitoring (photovoice), Playful Focus Groups, and Mind Maps.

Photo Monitoring (Photovoice) is a participatory action research method in which people are given cameras to create photographic accounts of their experiences, perspectives, and communities. The definition comes from Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997), who describe it as "a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique" (p. 369). It is a practice that depends on the production of knowledge by the participants themselves.

Participants take photos that are meaningful to them, and then, in facilitated group discussions, they use their images as a catalyst to share stories, identify common themes, and articulate their lived realities. This process empowers participants, especially those from marginalized groups like children, to become agents of their own representation and advocate for their own needs. The visual nature of the method acts as a catalyst for conversation, facilitating communication and easing verbal barriers, making it a particularly effective tool for engaging children and youth in research (Wang, 1999). While it does not completely eliminate verbal barriers, it serves as a powerful facilitation tool to spark dialogue.

Playful Focus Groups are a qualitative data collection method that adapts the traditional focus group format to be developmentally appropriate for children by integrating play, games, and other creative activities. The method is an application of the principles outlined by Krueger and Casey (2009), who define a focus group as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (p. 2). The "playful" component makes this environment suitable for children.

Mind Maps are a non-linear, graphical note-taking and brainstorming tool used to visually organize information. Burgess-Allen and Owen-Smith (2010) defined the method as, "a diagram used to represent concepts, ideas or tasks linked to and arranged radially around a central key word or idea" (p. 407). Developed by Tony Buzan in the 1960s, the technique is designed to mirror the brain's natural way of thinking radiantly and associatively, rather than linearly (Buzan & Buzan, 2006). For instance, a child might draw a central image representing a 'safe space' and radiate branches outward with symbols of family, school, and play, visually mapping their interconnected thoughts.

By integrating theoretical research with practical field experience, the article illustrates how these tools can be adapted to accommodate diverse languages, traditions, and social contexts while maintaining their capacity to produce high-quality findings that inform both program improvement and policy development. It is important to acknowledge a significant practical constraint; conducting a fully culturally responsive evaluation is not always a feasible option, not because it is difficult to be executed but because external evaluators contracted by international organizations must often abide by the methodological frameworks and budgetary restraints set by the contracting agency. This does not mean that the "cultural responsiveness hat" should be ignored entirely; rather, it means that institutional and resource constraints can significantly limit the extent to which such a framework can be adopted.

The case studies presented in this paper were selected precisely because the evaluation teams were explicitly asked to adopt a culturally responsive framework and were granted flexibility to design the methodology in a manner that was responsive to the local context. The second aim of this article is to demonstrate to international agencies that requesting a culturally responsive approach in terms of reference and requests for proposals can add significant depth and validity to evaluation findings and recommendations, leading to more effective and sustainable programming.

Theoretical Framework

The use of Photo Monitoring (photovoice), Playful Focus Groups, and Mind Maps is not at random; the three methods are grounded in established theories that justify their application, particularly with children in traumatic contexts. Constructivist learning theory, empowerment theory, and the cultural responsiveness framework provide a robust theoretical rationale for their use.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist learning theory suggests that individuals are not passive recipients of information but active builders of their own knowledge. The construction of meaning happens through the interaction with the environment and the social contexts (Piaget, 1971). This theory is particularly relevant for children who make meaning of things through their own experiences. Each of the three evaluation methods is an application of this theory. Mind Maps is a method known for improving critical thinking, allowing children to visually construct and connect their knowledge. Polat and Aydın (2020) proved this through an experimental study of 116 children aged 48-72 months showing statistically significant improvements ($p < .001$) with large effect sizes (Cohen's $d = 1.23$) in critical thinking. This means that not only is this method suitable to collect evaluative data, but it also helps children in conflict contexts influenced by trauma, displacement, and cultural disruption to sharpen their thinking skills.

Photo Monitoring applies the theory by enabling children to select images that are meaningful to them and construct narratives around them, thereby articulating their own understanding of their experiences. This method is fundamentally constructivist as it enables children to document the meaningful moments through their own photographs, reflect upon them, and share their own opinions. Wang and Burris (1997) describe photovoice as "a practice based in the production of knowledge" that enables people to "record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns" and "promote critical dialogue and knowledge about important issues" (p. 369). The entire process allows children to actively construct and represent their understanding of their world. It shifts the power dynamic, by transforming the child as the expert and the evaluator as a facilitator, which is an essential pillar of constructivist-inspired research (Wang, 1999). The visual nature of the method helps overcome verbal limitations and facilitates a deeper understanding between the child and the evaluator (Benninger & Savahl, 2016).

Playful Focus Groups create a social environment where children build knowledge through interactive, game-based discussions, making the evaluation process itself a form of active learning. This approach is directly rooted in the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, who argued that play is a primary engine of development and learning. Taylor and Boyer (2020) note that play-based learning "is child-centered and focuses on children's academic, social, and emotional development, and their interests and abilities through engaging and developmentally appropriate learning experiences" (p. 127). By using play, games, and creative activities (like drawing) within a focus group setting, researchers create a developmentally appropriate and non-threatening environment. This allows children to express complex ideas and experiences that they might not be able to articulate in a traditional Q&A format. Adler et al. (2019) explain that "focus group interviews allow participants to tell their own stories, express their opinions, and even draw pictures without having to adhere to a strict sequence of questions" and that "focus groups can be used to create a safe peer environment for children" that helps "avoid some of the power imbalances between researchers and participants" (p. 1). The group dynamic also facilitates social learning, where children build upon each other's ideas, co-constructing meaning in a way that is consistent with Vygotsky's social constructivism (Hedges, 2000).

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory focuses on processes by which individuals and communities gain control over their lives and the decisions that affect them. In conflict zones, where children are extremely traumatized, evaluation can and should be an empowering process. This framework challenges traditional, top-down evaluation models by positioning participants as experts in their own lives (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005). All three methods are participatory and empowering. Photo Monitoring (photovoice) gives children control over the narrative by allowing them to document, reflect upon, and discuss their own realities, which can reveal resilience that is often missed by adult-led research (Barrington et al., 2017). Playful Focus Groups empower children by creating a safe space where their opinions are solicited and valued, using play to break down adult-child power hierarchies. Mind Maps empower children by overcoming any language barriers and extracting their knowledge through providing them with a tool to articulate complex thoughts.

Cultural Responsiveness Framework

Finally, the cultural responsiveness framework explains that evaluation must be adjusted to accommodate the cultural and contextual dimensions of participants' lives (Hopson, 2009). This goes beyond translation efforts to deeply understand local norms, values, communication styles, and power dynamics. This framework is the umbrella under which the other theories and methods operate. An evaluator can apply constructivist and empowerment principles effectively only by being culturally responsive. For example, in Playful Focus Groups, the choice of games must be culturally appropriate and familiar. In Photo Monitoring, the interpretation of images must be guided by a cultural insider's understanding of symbols and social context. In Mind Maps, the evaluator must be aware of culturally specific ways of representing concepts and relationships. As my field experience demonstrates, this framework requires continuous adaptation and a deep reliance on local expertise.

Methods

Case Studies from the Field

To illustrate the practical application of these methods, this section presents three distinct case studies from summative evaluations I led as the Lead Evaluator. Each case demonstrates how a specific child-centered method was chosen and adapted to fit the unique goals, context, and participant demographics of humanitarian programs in a conflict zone. The evaluations were conducted in Syria and Palestine to assess

children's educational and psychological interventions. One intervention focused on raising awareness about sexual abuse, one focused on building resilience, while the last one aimed at improving literacy among marginalized children. Activities included awareness-raising sessions, psychosocial support programs, and play-based learning. The projects targeted children aged 6-18. The following sections will provide an in-depth description for each case study. Across the three case studies, the data collected comprised qualitative insights (e.g., drawings, photographs, and transcribed narratives) and observational notes from over 20 focus groups and evaluative sessions involving approximately 150 children and 12 caregivers. This data was gathered to capture nuanced, contextualized experiences rather than large-scale representative metrics. Participants were purposively selected based on their enrollment in the respective programs, aiming for a mix of ages and genders. The aggregate dataset included 48 mind maps, 60 selected photographs with corresponding narratives, and transcripts from 16 focus groups. While this purposive sampling highlights successful implementation, it introduces potential selection bias, and the findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than saturated. To arrive at the insights presented, the collected materials including visual artifacts and transcribed discussions were reviewed using a thematic analysis approach. Local experts and evaluation team members collaboratively interpreted these materials to identify recurring themes, cultural symbols, and significant narratives, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the participants' lived realities while maintaining the applied nature of the evaluation. The analytic process followed a systematic chain of evidence: raw data (transcripts, drawings, photos) were first open-coded for recurring concepts, which were then grouped into broader thematic categories (e.g., 'coping mechanisms', 'practical application of skills'). These themes were cross-referenced with observational notes and validated by local experts to generate the final claims, ensuring an auditable trail from raw data to findings.

Case Study 1: Playful Focus Groups for a Child Protection Program in Palestine

About the intervention. Child Protection Program is a project that managed an extremely sensitive topic that is considered as a taboo in a super conservative country. It aimed at increasing children's awareness of how to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate touch. The project provided awareness sessions for children and parents, psychosocial support for abused children, and outreach activities to raise the community awareness about the seriousness of the issue and the deep lasting impact on children in case of treatment negligence. The project was a four-year project that targeted children from the age of 6 to 18 years old living in the Palestinian Territories. Each group of children received three sessions each session tackled different protection topics and included different activities. The project targeted more than six thousand children and ten thousand parents and caregivers. It was the first of its kind and opened the door to a topic that is considered taboo.

Evaluation design and Methods. Since the project was a non-traditional project, it required a non-traditional evaluation methodology. My role was the lead evaluator, and I was entrusted to conduct a summative evaluation. After in-depth discussions with the evaluation team, we decided to follow a participatory approach, ensuring that children and their caregivers were involved in the evaluation design from the beginning. Caregivers were consulted about their willingness to participate in documenting program impacts, their perspectives on the most effective child-friendly evaluation methods, and the approaches they believed would elicit meaningful responses from their children. Additionally, after receiving training, some caregivers facilitated focus group discussions with their children.

Project Facilitators working with children were also consulted by the evaluation team to learn about the playful methods they use during the sessions. We attended some of the sessions to observe and familiarize ourselves with those methods. The evaluation team noticed several methods used by the facilitators and showed their effectiveness in elevating children's interaction and learning during the sessions. Those methods included using the parachute game and dolls to discuss appropriate vs. inappropriate touch, and the flower game to discuss abuse scenarios.

The choice of using playful Focus Group Discussion. Standard focus groups can be intimidating and cognitively demanding for young participants. A playful approach embeds data collection within activities that are natural and engaging for children, such as drawing, storytelling, role-playing, or using puppets. By using these techniques, researchers can create a safe and enjoyable peer environment that reduces the inherent power imbalance between adult researchers and child participants (Adler et al., 2019). This allows children to express complex thoughts, feelings, and experiences that they might not be able to articulate in a more formal, question-and-answer format. The method is highly flexible and can be adapted for children as young as three or four, enabling them to become active contributors to the research process (DeCosta et al., 2023).

The topic of sexual abuse is also extremely sensitive and difficult for young children to discuss directly. A play-based approach was chosen to allow for indirect communication through activities, reducing the potential for re-traumatization and aligning with trauma-informed practice.

Adaptation of the methods to the evaluation context. Trauma-informed care is essential, especially when dealing with projects of a sensitive nature, such as child protection topics. Play-based methods provide indirect pathways for expression and disclosure that feel safer and more natural (Broaddus-Shea et al., 2021), unlike direct questioning about abuse experiences that can be re-traumatizing for children. Playful techniques can create a psychologically safe environment where children can engage in complex topics without feeling directly exposed or vulnerable. This is what we tried to do during our focus groups. We conducted sixteen focus group discussions (FGDs). To accommodate this wide age range, focus groups were segmented by age cohorts (e.g., 6-9, 10-13, and 14-18). Evaluation activities and the way questions were asked were tailored according to the age group. Younger groups went through all three evaluation activities explained in the next paragraph, while evaluators focused on using the flower game with older groups of children because it allowed them to discuss complex scenarios and was more age-appropriate for them.

For each FGD with younger age groups, we started with the parachute game where the children were asked to gather around the parachute and catch one side of it. The FGD facilitator positions in the middle of the parachute and throws a ball (on the parachute) towards the kids while asking some introductory questions about the different feelings and ask the children about how they feel today and when they experience each feeling. During the discussion whenever the ball goes toward one kid and they succeed in keeping it on the parachute, they will be the one to answer the question, then other kids were asked to elaborate on what their friend said. Answers came naturally from children without stress and without any influence from the evaluation facilitator.

After familiarizing themselves with the children through the parachute game and dragging some conversations about feelings, the facilitators moved to the doll game, where they used dolls to create a kind of puppet show, and used the show to ask the children questions about a good touch versus a bad touch and bodies parts that no one should see or touch. Following the puppet show the facilitators used the flower game where children were the petals and the facilitator was the center of the flower. The game starts with all kids holding each other's hands in a tight circular motion around the facilitator, then the facilitator starts asking questions about how to act in case you experienced a bad touch or if you were attacked by someone who wants to harm you. Every time a kid provides an example they extend their arms on the side as if the flower petals were opening till the entire flower opens.

As the lead evaluator, I observed that direct questioning yielded little more than shy silence. However, once we introduced the parachute game to build rapport and then transitioned to using dolls, the children's engagement transformed. They were able to point to the dolls and say, "This is a bad touch," a level of expression that was inaccessible through conversation alone.

The involvement of trained parents in documenting children's responses was an effective approach that assisted in balancing child protection with community engagement. This approach endorsed cultural

appropriateness while providing additional safeguarding oversight by parents. This method addressed the concerns raised by Arbeiter and Toros (2017) about the need for robust safeguarding protocols when engaging children in sensitive evaluation contexts. However, this approach carries inherent risks, particularly when discussing sensitive topics like unwanted touching, as the presence of a parent could inhibit disclosure if the abuser is a family member or friend. To mitigate this, parent observers were carefully screened, and facilitators were trained to monitor for signs of distress or hesitation, ensuring the primary focus remained on general awareness rather than personal disclosure. Also, FGDs were conducted with identified groups of children where no cases of child abuse were reported to assure that children will not go through any negative emotions during the FGD process.

Through our evaluation work, we noticed that parent involvement required careful training and ongoing supervision to ensure that documentation remained focused on children's perspectives rather than adult interpretations. To ensure the integrity of the process members of the evaluation team attended the first FGDs conducted with the children as evaluation observers to document the FGD insights and children's responses. Notes collected by the evaluation members and the parents during the sessions were compared and analyzed to determine any discrepancies and to guide parents on the right way to document the children's insights. Parents served as cultural interpreters and safety monitors while learning to recognize and respect children's autonomy in sharing their experiences. This approach assisted in building community capacity for child protection while generating high-quality evaluation data. It also helped in easing facilitators' discomfort on how to ask sensitive questions to the children.

Case Study 2: Photo Monitoring Used in Child Resilience Project

About the intervention. Child resilience project was a two-year project that was implemented also in Palestinian territories (Gaza specifically) with children from age 8-14 after experiencing a massive conflict in 2008 that caused a lot of trauma. The project aimed at providing psychosocial support through a series of group and individual counseling sessions to strengthen children's resilience and coping mechanisms during and after wartime. The Project served more than six thousand children.

Evaluation design and Methods. the evaluation design evolved before the project started not at the end. It was important to plan ahead of time to obtain the pictures during the group sessions.

I served as the lead evaluator and data analyst for this evaluation. It was important to obtain caregivers' consents to take photographs of their children during sessions and to allow their children to participate in the evaluation photo display to share their opinions, feelings, and learning experiences.

The choice of using Photovoice. Resilience and coping are abstract concepts. Photo Monitoring was chosen to ground the discussion in concrete, shared experiences, allowing adolescents to articulate their internal experiences by reflecting on external activities they recognized. It is an empowering method well-suited for adolescents.

Adaptation of the methods to the evaluation context. in a traditional photovoice implementation, usually the project participants are the ones who take the activities' pictures and comments on them. Since the group sessions required in-depth involvement of the children to maximize their psychological benefits, the evaluation team decided to assign two evaluation team members to attend several sessions with diverse groups. Groups were selected at random to be part of the evaluation process. The evaluation team members were trained to take actionable pictures for the different activities without attracting attention to their existence during the sessions. The evaluation team wanted to minimize any negative impact this interaction might have on the children during the group sessions.

After collecting meaningful pictures, the evaluation team created a sort of exhibit with all the pictures taken. For the older children's groups, children were asked to select a specific picture that was meaningful

to them and to draft a short story about the session's impact on their lives. Each picture had a unique code on it and children were asked to copy that code to their stories to facilitate linking the stories to the pictures. The method was modified again to fit younger groups of children who did not have a strong ability for expressing their opinions in writing. Notetakers documented children's responses and captured their coping strategies and experiences by asking each child to select a picture and express their feelings verbally while the notetakers were documenting their answers. To move beyond simple descriptions, we trained facilitators to use a simplified version of the SHOWED framework (What do you See here? What is Happening? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this situation Exist? What can we Do about it?). This structured questioning guided participants toward deeper reflection on the meaning behind the activities.

The evaluation of the "Child Resilience" project required careful attention to cultural norms. Boys and girls were grouped separately to respect local customs and encourage parental consent to allow their children to attend project's activities including evaluation activities. Notetakers were also chosen to be from the same gender of the participating groups.. Gender separation respected cultural norms and created safe spaces for children to express experiences that might be gender-specific, particularly important in contexts where boys and girls face distinct types of conflict-related stressors.

The evaluation team also hired local experts to provide in-depth interpretations of children's feedback on the photographs during the analysis phase. The involvement of local experts was essential for interpreting visual materials within appropriate cultural contexts. Besides the unique cultural experiences documented through the photographs, experts were also able to provide references to major events that affected children's expressions that required sophisticated local knowledge for accurate interpretation. This process allowed the evaluation findings to reflect accurately children's experiences in their social and cultural contexts.

The theoretical foundation in visual anthropology and empowerment theory (Barrington et al., 2017) proved essential for implementation in conflict contexts where children had developed complex resilience strategies in response to ongoing trauma and displacement. Visual methods such as photo-monitoring enable participants to articulate experiences that were difficult to express through verbal communication alone, particularly important given the multilingual context and varying levels of formal education among participants.

My primary role in this evaluation was to train the local facilitators and analyze the qualitative data. A key breakthrough came when we moved beyond asking "What do you see?" to asking "How did you feel in this moment?" and "What did this activity help you forget?" A photograph of a mural painting session prompted one young man to explain, "When I am painting, I am not hearing the drones. My mind is quiet." This single comment, elicited by a visual prompt, was more revealing than an hour of direct questioning about coping mechanisms. It demonstrated the power of this method to access the lived reality of resilience.

Case Study 3: Mind Maps for a Literacy Program

About the intervention. Syria's literacy project, was a much-complicated project not because the intervention itself but due to the population nature. Children were displaced from so many regions in Syria, they had different dialects, traditions and even religions. The project was a two-year project aimed at improving literacy and fostering a love for reading among young children. The project was implemented in Syrian camps and targeted internally displaced children aged 8-12 with diverse linguistic backgrounds and disrupted schooling. Project activities included reading sessions where children were asked to select one book and read it with the help of the session facilitator, then illustrated what they learned from those books, This activity helped kids especially the ones that have been disconnected for a long period from schools to recall the language and improve their reading skills.

Evaluation design and Methods. As the evaluation lead, I was facing two main challenges when designing an evaluation for this project. The first challenge was linguistic diversity. Although the evaluation team consisted of local members who know the local context, many of them did not have a comprehensive knowledge to understand all the dialects and symbols used by the children. The second challenge was thinking about the analysis phase and the synthesis of the collected data to make a meaningful story out of it. Similar to the previous project it was important to integrate parents and caregivers in the planning process, ask them about their children's abilities, the extent to which they loved drawing and how comfortable they will feel if we asked them to express their knowledge and emotions through drawings.

Caregivers were super supportive and we got their buy-in in sending their children to attend the evaluation sessions. Parents were also involved in the evaluation process as we conducted some focus group discussions with them to learn more about the impact of the program on their kids as caregivers and how the program helped their children's academic level improve. Based on all the previous, the evaluation team decided to use the mind map method in the evaluation process. Besides the 12 FGDs conducted with caregivers, the evaluation team implemented twelve evaluative sessions with more than ninety-six children using the mind map method. Children were asked to reflect first on what they learned from the stories and draw everything they learned in groups four children on one large poster paper, then they were asked to express their feelings after being able to read the stories fluently also in drawing. When done drawing, the evaluation facilitators asked the children to express what they draw and what does each drawing means to them and they took notes that were used later and incorporated with the mind maps to provide in-depth analysis.

The choice of Mind Maps. Mind Mapping is a visual thinking tool that helps in structuring information and exploring concepts. In an evaluation context, children can use it to draw connections between program activities and outcomes, using images, symbols, and words to represent their understanding in a non-linear way. With a population of internally displaced children speaking various dialects and having inconsistent levels of literacy, a purely verbal or written evaluation method would have been inequitable. Mind Maps were chosen as a visual, non-linear tool that allowed all children to express their learning regardless of their writing ability.

Mind Maps, implemented in Syria's literacy project, were a tangible demonstration of the practicality of cognitive science research in challenging field contexts. Children recalled books they read, illustrated key learnings, and connected them to their academic progress, with local experts assisting in interpreting drawings and dialect-specific words. This approach directly applies research by Polat and Aydın (2020), whose experimental study demonstrated that mind mapping activities generate significant improvements in critical thinking skills with large effect sizes indicating practical significance.

The implementation in Syria's complex linguistic environment, where internally displaced children spoke various dialects and had diverse educational backgrounds, provided a good context to assess the effectiveness of the methodology. Visual representation enabled children to demonstrate learning and understanding that might not be apparent through traditional assessment methods, particularly important given disrupted educational experiences, and varying levels of formal literacy.

Local experts assisted in interpreting drawings and dialect-specific words, ensuring an in-depth cultural analysis. We engaged local experts (teachers and cultural figures from the same communities as the children) to help interpret the mind maps. They understood the dialect-specific words and cultural symbols, providing a much richer analysis. The analysis team and local experts integrated local insights, drawings, and recordings to ensure a culturally grounded evaluation. They played crucial roles in understanding cultural symbols, narrative traditions, and educational practices embedded in children's visual representations, enabled the discovery of advanced analytical insights. This practical experience is supported by research findings by Boerma et al. (2022), who demonstrated that mind mapping supports language development through visual

scaffolding, including cultural and linguistic diversity considerations. Instead of trying to standardize the maps, we treated them as rich qualitative data. We analyzed them thematically, looking for recurring symbols (e.g., a lightbulb for a new idea, a heart next to a favorite book) and common pathways drawn between the reading activities and outcomes like "helping my father at the market" (indicating practical application of numeracy/literacy).

In this evaluation, my role involved designing the data collection protocol and training the local team. The richness of the data we collected was astonishing. A traditional survey might have asked, "Did you like the program?" and received a simple "yes." The mind maps, however, showed why. One child drew a book, then a line to a drawing of a marketplace with numbers, and then a line to a smiling face. With the help of a local expert, we understood that the child had learned to read prices from a storybook and was now able to help his family shop, a source of immense pride. This method allowed us to capture impact in a way that was far more profound and meaningful than a simple interview or focus group.

Evaluation team preparation and training was highly important. The team was trained in safeguarding principals and how to deal with children who might be triggered by any emotions during the evaluation process due to the trauma they were exposed to. The evaluation team was also required to study dialects, accents, and cultural norms, particularly in Syria, where internally displaced persons came from diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. To ensure cultural relevance, local experts were engaged to help navigate dialects, taboos, and cultural restrictions, playing a key role in educating the evaluation team.

Mind mapping was not only an evaluation method it was an empowerment method, especially in conflict zones, where traditional power structures may be disrupted and children's voices particularly marginalized. Mind mapping is one of the methods that helps in empowering children and allows them to articulate complicated concepts and feelings, revealing sources of strength that might not emerge through traditional evaluation approaches (Barrington et al., 2017).

Discussion and Lessons Learned

The successful implementation of these three distinct methods across different conflict zones reveals several cross-cutting lessons for practitioners. These lessons underscore the importance of moving from a mindset of methodological purity to one of adaptive, culturally responsive practice.

First, the integration of local expertise is non-negotiable. In all three case studies, the evaluations would have failed or produced superficial findings without the deep involvement of local community members. They were not merely translators but cultural interpreters, community liaisons, and co-researchers who ensured the methods were implemented safely and effectively. This aligns with the broader movement to decolonize evaluation by shifting power to local stakeholders.

The integration of cultural responsiveness with child-centered evaluation creates a sophisticated framework that addresses both developmental appropriateness and cultural sensitivity. Understanding local dynamics, consulting with communities, and leveraging local experts' roles are vital components in any evaluation task. Maillard (2024) provides evidence from five African countries demonstrating that successful implementation requires extensive community and cultural involvement. This framework proves essential in conflict zones where cultural disruption, displacement, and trauma create complex evaluation contexts requiring a nuanced understanding of local contexts.

Through my field experience across Syria, Palestine, Iraq, and Ukraine, it has become clear that cultural responsiveness extends beyond language translation to encompass understanding of trauma responses, family structures, religious practices, and community dynamics. Even within single countries, religious

diversity, urban-rural divides, and dialectal variations necessitate sophisticated cultural competence and adaptability from evaluation teams.

Second, methodologies must be adapted for trauma-affected populations. Children in conflict zones are not typical research subjects. The use of play, visual prompts, and indirect communication is a trauma-informed practice that creates a safe environment for expression. These methods acknowledge that trauma can affect a child's ability or willingness to communicate verbally and provide alternative pathways for them to share their experiences.

As mentioned previously, traditional evaluation tools are often unsuitable for children in trauma-affected areas, confirming research findings about the need for developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed approaches. The use of Photo Monitoring, Playful Focus Groups, and Mind Maps helped in creating safe, engaging, and non-intimidating environments that encouraged open expression of children's feelings while respecting children's psychological needs and cultural contexts.

Before making any adaptations to any evaluation methodology for trauma-affected populations, it is crucial to develop a sophisticated understanding of how conflict experiences influence children's communication patterns, trust relationships, and emotional regulation. Visual methods provided the children with an alternative for expression that did not rely on their verbal communication. This component is extremely helpful for children who experienced trauma that affected their ability or willingness to engage in traditional interview formats.

Evaluation methods were created to serve evaluators, if the original implementation of the method is not feasible, changes should be made to adapt to the respondents, such as assigning someone to take photographs for the activities instead of distracting the children and asking them to take the pictures during the sessions or using games to facilitate a focus group instead of using Q&A traditional protocols.

Third, participatory approaches enhance data quality and build community capacity. Involving caregivers as co-facilitators in the child protection evaluation, for example, did more than just build trust; it provided them with new skills and a deeper understanding of child protection issues. This approach transforms the evaluation from an extractive process into a collaborative one, leaving behind strengthened community capacity.

The integration and training of caregivers as co-evaluators increased the validity and accuracy of data collection while making them active stakeholders in the evaluation process. This approach aligns with empowerment theory principles while addressing practical challenges of conducting evaluation in conflict contexts where community trust and engagement are essential for both access and quality.

Field experience demonstrated that caregiver involvement required a careful balance between community engagement and child protection considerations. Caregivers served as cultural interpreters, safety monitors, and community liaisons while learning to recognize and respect children's autonomy in sharing their experiences. This participatory approach enhanced evaluation quality while building local capacity for ongoing program monitoring and improvement.

Finally, flexibility and adaptive implementation are essential. In each case, the initial plan had to be adjusted in response to real-time field realities. Whether it was segregating groups by gender, introducing a new questioning framework, or bringing in experts to interpret drawings, the evaluation team had to be willing to deviate from the script. This requires evaluators to be skilled listeners and observers, capable of balancing methodological rigor with on-the-ground ethical and cultural considerations.

Real-time methodological adjustments developed a great skill among our evaluation teams, who had to integrate cultural sensitivity with trauma-informed practice. The evaluation teams learned to recognize when

methodological modifications were needed, how to maintain evaluation quality while adapting approaches, and how to balance research objectives with participant well-being and cultural appropriateness.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has sought to demonstrate, through a blend of theory and detailed field experience, that child-centered evaluation methodologies are sophisticated, evidence-based approaches that can be effectively and ethically implemented in the most challenging conflict contexts. The constructivist learning theory, empowerment theory, and cultural responsiveness framework provide a robust justification for these approaches, while field experience reveals the practical adaptations necessary for effective implementation, is not an optional addition. It is evidenced by the case studies: in the resilience project where a visual prompt unlocked a profound insight into a boy's coping strategy; in the child protection project where a doll allowed a child to speak about the unspeakable; and in the literacy project where a drawing revealed a story of pride and newfound capability. These methods are not simply "cool" methods to be used; they generate more valid, nuanced, and insightful data than traditional methods can in these contexts.

Based on these experiences, I offer the following recommendations for humanitarian organizations. These recommendations are presented in order of priority, beginning with the most critical foundational steps (Cultural Assessment and Capacity Building) and progressing toward structural implementations (Field Kits and Rationale Tools).

Conduct a Cultural Assessment

Cultural assessment is the first step towards successful evaluation implementation. The assessment extends beyond demographic analysis to encompass an understanding of trauma responses, community dynamics, power structures, and cultural practices related to childhood, education, and family relationships. The assessment phase involves extensive consultation with local experts, community leaders, parents, and children themselves, which helps understand cultural norms, communication patterns, and appropriate adaptation strategies.

Field experience revealed that even within single communities, significant diversity exists that requires a nuanced understanding and adaptive approaches. This assessment provides the foundation for all subsequent methodological adaptations and implementation decisions.

Capacity Building and Training

Developing comprehensive training for the evaluation team that addresses both technical competencies and cultural sensitivities is vital to ensure effective facilitation in conflict contexts. The training programs should tackle child development principles, trauma-informed approaches, cultural sensitivity, participatory research methods, and specific techniques associated with each methodology. Ongoing supervision and support systems are also essential for maintaining quality and addressing challenges that arise during implementation.

The capacity building process must involve multiple stakeholders, including evaluation team members, local experts, community facilitators, and caregivers who will participate in evaluation activities. Each group requires diverse types of training adapted to their roles and responsibilities, while all participants need an understanding of ethical considerations, child protection protocols, and cultural sensitivity requirements.

Cultural Adaptation & Methods Implementation

Cultural adaptation should be recognized as an essential component of implementation requiring ongoing attention throughout all phases of evaluation design, implementation, and analysis. Local expertise

and community participation are necessary for effective implementation and should be integrated as core components rather than optional enhancements.

The implementation of the three methods mentioned in this article requires commitment, training, and resources. However, as the integration of research evidence with over 18 years of field experience demonstrates, their value for organizations committed to truly participatory, ethical, and impactful humanitarian programming is undeniable. The constructivist learning theory, empowerment theory, and cultural responsiveness all together provide robust justification for these approaches, while field experience reveals the practical adaptations necessary for effective implementation.

Establish a Two-Stage Cultural Adaptation Protocol

To move beyond “cultural sensitivity” as a buzzword, evaluators should implement a formal, two-stage protocol. Stage one is a pre-deployment ‘Cultural Scoping’ phase where the lead evaluator collaborates with local experts to map key norms, taboos, communication styles, and child-rearing practices relevant to the evaluation topic. The second stage includes an in-field ‘Adaptive Implementation’ session held after the first day of data collection, where the entire evaluation team discusses what worked, what did not, and what needs to be modified based on real-time observations of child engagement and comfort levels.

Quality Assurance in Challenging Contexts

Quality assurance in conflict-affected settings demands a strategic integration of methodological rigor with child-centered, trauma-informed approaches. Traditional quality assurance measures, designed for stable environments, require substantial adaptation to address the unique ethical, logistical, and cultural challenges inherent in conflict contexts, including security constraints, population mobility, and ongoing trauma responses. Effective quality assurance must embrace adaptive frameworks that balance systematic data collection and analysis with the flexibility required to respond to rapidly changing circumstances while maintaining accountability and evidence-based practice.

This adapted approach is anchored in three interdependent dimensions: cultural validity, participatory reliability, and ethical practices. Cultural validity ensures that program activities, assessment tools, and evaluation frameworks align with local norms, values, and expressions of well-being, preventing misinterpretation of trauma responses and ensuring data accurately reflects community experiences. Participatory reliability strengthens data trustworthiness by actively involving community members in data collection and analysis processes, leveraging local knowledge, and creating resilient data systems that can adapt to changing circumstances. Ethical practices safeguard vulnerable populations through comprehensive commitment to “Do No Harm” principles, multi-layered informed consent procedures, confidentiality protections, clear referral pathways for support services, and provision of psychosocial support for both participants and data collectors who may experience secondary trauma.

These dimensions require continuous monitoring and adaptation as contexts evolve and new challenges emerge. Incorporating multiple perspectives particularly those of local stakeholders, including children, caregivers, community leaders, and frontline staff into all stages of the evaluation process is essential for enhancing quality and building sustainable local capacity. Practical implementation strategies include co-developing culturally appropriate assessment tools with community advisory committees, training local youth as community researchers to conduct ongoing monitoring, establishing comprehensive ethical safeguards including referral pathways and support systems, and fostering organizational cultures that value learning, reflection, and continuous improvement. This approach not only enhances the quality of data and program effectiveness but also builds local capacity, fosters trust, and contributes to long-term resilience and empowerment in conflict-affected communities.

Resource Allocation

More resources should be allocated by humanitarian organizations towards comprehensive trainings that addresses both technical skills and cultural competencies, recognizing that this aspect is essential for high-quality implementation and sustainable impact. In resource-constrained environments where extensive training is not feasible, organizations should consider scaled-down alternatives, such as relying on simplified visual prompts or partnering with existing local psychosocial support networks, rather than abandoning child-centered approaches entirely. If core ethical and safety standards cannot be met even with these alternatives, it may be safer to defer the evaluation until adequate resources are secured.

A careful analysis of evaluation objectives, cultural contexts, trauma considerations, and available resources should be taken into consideration before selecting any methodology. The methodology consideration offers distinct advantages that should be matched to specific evaluation needs while considering participant characteristics, cultural appropriateness, and security constraints.

For evaluation practitioners the following steps are recommended before conducting any evaluation:

- **Develop and Disseminate a ‘Child-Centered Evaluation Field Kit’ for Conflict Zones.** Instead of relying on generic guidance, organizations should invest in a tangible kit for field teams. This kit should include a modular training curriculum on trauma-informed questioning, a guide with visual aids for obtaining meaningful assent from children of different age groups, and pre-designed templates for activities like the “flower game” or simplified photovoice frameworks. This would standardize best practices while still allowing for adaptation. This kit can be provided with the terms of reference soliciting evaluation services to inform the evaluation specialist of the level of evaluation required and prepare them before starting the evaluation assignments.
- **Mandate the Use of a ‘Methodology Rationale’ Tool.** Before any evaluation involving children in conflict zones, lead evaluators should be required to complete a simple, one-page tool that justifies their choice of methods in their evaluation proposal. The tool should require them to explain why a chosen method is appropriate for the specific age group, the cultural context, and the evaluation questions, and to anticipate potential ethical challenges and safeguarding measures. This would force a more deliberate and thoughtful approach to methodological selection.

These methodologies achieve superior engagement, generate unique insights, and contribute to children's development while producing high-quality evaluation findings. The quantitative evidence from experimental studies, particularly Polat and Aydın's (2020) study, showed that significant improvements in critical thinking skills, combined with field evidence of enhanced community engagement and program improvement, provide compelling justification for the broader adoption of these approaches.

This research showed that child-centered evaluation methodologies are evidence-based approaches that can significantly enhance evaluation quality while contributing to children's development and empowerment in conflict contexts. It is highly important to emphasize that the implementation of these methods requires substantial commitment and investment. However, the integration of research evidence with field experience supports their value for organizations committed to truly participatory and responsive humanitarian programming.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

It is essential to acknowledge the contextual limits of the three approaches presented in this paper. They are most applicable in settings where sufficient time and resources exist to build trust, engage local experts, and adapt tools to specific cultural and linguistic nuances. In acute emergency phases with severe time

constraints or where security risks preclude gathering children safely, more rapid, less participatory methods may be necessary.

Another limitation of this study is in its transferability; because this manuscript aggregates experiences across diverse settings, the specific contextual features such as variations in cultural norms, specific program types, or baseline facilitator skills are not systematically compared. Consequently, the findings serve more as expert reflections on methodological potential rather than generalizable evaluation research. It is important to note that the case studies, quotes, and artifacts presented in this paper are intended to serve as illustrative examples rather than representative samples. They function to demonstrate the practical application and contextual adaptation of these methods, rather than to provide definitive proof of their universal validity. While the compelling narratives presented in this article highlight the potential of these methods, they represent specific positive outcomes and were not analytically sampled for statistical frequency. Future studies should systematically document negative or contradictory cases to better understand the conditions under which these methods might fail.

Further research is needed to continue building the evidence base for child-centered evaluation approaches in conflict-affected settings. While these methodologies show promise, practitioners and policymakers require more robust empirical evidence to guide best practices, inform resource allocation decisions, and advocate for broader adoption. The following priorities focus on research that can be implemented by organizations already working in these contexts.

Longitudinal studies examining the sustained impacts of participation on children's development and advocacy skills represent the most pressing research need. These studies should track child participants over multiple years to assess three key outcome areas: the development and persistence of life skills such as critical thinking, communication, and leadership; long-term psychosocial well-being including self-esteem, agency, and resilience; and sustained civic engagement and community leadership.

Comparative research examining the relative advantages and cost-effectiveness of different child-centered methodologies for specific contexts is essential for guiding practitioner decisions. Studies should compare approaches such as arts-based methods, participatory action research, and digital storytelling to determine which work best for different evaluation objectives including needs assessment, program monitoring, and impact evaluation. Research should also examine how methodology effectiveness varies across age groups, cultural contexts, and types of conflict settings. Simplified cost-effectiveness analysis should compare resource requirements against data quality and utility.

Research on ethical safeguarding and support mechanisms is needed to identify which practices most effectively protect children while enabling meaningful participation. Priority questions include examining the effectiveness of multi-layered consent processes involving community leaders, parents, and children; investigating which referral pathways and psychosocial support mechanisms work best for children who experience distress; and identifying protective factors that prevent secondary trauma among child researchers.

Research on scalability and sustainability should examine how organizations can move child-centered approaches from small-scale pilots to routine practice. Key questions include identifying organizational structures, policies, and cultures that support sustained implementation; comparing intensive implementations with lighter-touch adaptations feasible for resource-constrained settings; and investigating factors that predict whether organizations continue these approaches after external support ends.

To maximize feasibility and impact, this research agenda should be pursued through partnerships between practitioners, academic institutions, and conflict-affected communities. Organizations already implementing child-centered evaluations can integrate research questions into existing work, minimizing additional resources. Collaborative research networks can share tools and findings across contexts,

accelerating learning. Importantly, children and youth should be involved as co-evaluators, ensuring the research itself models participatory principles. By focusing on these research areas, the field can build a stronger evidence base that guides practice, informs policy, and strengthens the case for child-centered approaches in conflict contexts.

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