



Evaluation Makes No Sense Without Democracy and Peace

Aida El Khoury, Samia Khayo and Juan Andrés Ligeró

Who we are

- **Aida El Khoury de Paula**, Ph.D., Lebanese, evaluator and researcher. My personal experience and my professional life have led me towards activism for peace, the defense of the human rights of populations at war and without a voice.
- **Samia Khayo**, Ph.D., Palestinian, evaluation professional in International Cooperation, based in Barcelona. My journey as a professional began in Palestine, where I witnessed first-hand the impacts of occupation, human rights violation and displacement. This personal connection has driven my dedication to fostering human rights, social justice and equality through my evaluation work.
- **Juan Andrés Ligeró Lasa**, Ph.D., Spanish, sociologist, associate professor at Carlos III University and co-director of the Master in Program Evaluation and Public Policies. I specialize in evaluation methodology, and I identify as a Human Rights Defender.

Context, justification and objective

- Some of us have participated recently **in an evaluation process during the recent Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank**. The contract required the evaluation to continue in a context of war, death and famine.
- This presentation (and the underlying reflection) was born in a conversational group about the evaluation in a context of conflict and ongoing war, during a series of reflection sessions within the [Master degree of Evaluation of Programmes and Public Policy of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid](#) (Spain).
- The objective of this presentation is to illustrate **the infeasibility and even inconsistency of achieving some evaluation purposes** without a context of a lack of democratic system and peace.

The evaluand and the assignment

The **program**:

- Implemented from 2020-2024, across five regions - one being MENA - and one thematic initiative.
- Goal: to support democratic organizations in forming broad, strategic alliances for progressive development.
- Priorities: **countering threats to democracy and human rights, advancing equality and workers' rights, promoting sustainability through a just transition, fostering peace and dialogue, and increasing gender equality.**

The **assignment**:

- Objective: to assess the outcomes of the program.
- Focusing on the impact of behavioral changes among key actor groups and their contribution to the program's objectives.
- The evaluation used the Outcome Harvesting methodology to gather stories of change from participants through open conversations.

This presentation focuses on the evaluation experience, specifically data collection, in the context of Palestine.

Situation from which the theoretical questions emerge (1)

Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT):

- A deeply entrenched political crisis
- Over 56 years of illegal Israeli military occupation ([United Nations Security Council Resolution 242: ICJ Advisory Note](#)) and 16 years of a debilitating blockade on Gaza (OCHA - [Fact Sheet - Gaza Strip | The humanitarian impact of 15 years of the blockade - June 2022](#)).
- Recurrent escalations of violence, physical and mental health harm, dispossession and deprivation of essential means of life, forced displacement, freedom of movement and widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law (The State of the World's Human Rights, Amnesty International 2024).

As of late 2023, The humanitarian situation has drastically worsened:

- In Gaza, with over 41,000 deaths and widespread displacement. Approximately 1.9 million people have been displaced of a population of 2.2 million (<https://www.ochaopt.org>).
- Acute shortages of essential services, including access to adequate shelter, food, clean water, healthcare, and education (Situation Report, [OCHA](#)).
- In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, also faces escalating violence, with 652 killed and more than 5,400 injured (<https://www.ochaopt.org>).
- Movement restrictions and increased Israeli attacks exacerbate the crisis, severely impacting Palestinians' access to essential services.
- Mental health needs have surged due to the violence, displacement, and loss of loved ones ([PALESTINE Impact of the conflict on mental health and psychosocial support needs in Gaza, ACAPS, Sep. 2024](#)).

Situation from which the theoretical questions emerge (2)

Following various discussion among evaluation stakeholders on the feasibility of the evaluation, It was agreed to continue with the evaluation despite acknowledging the context.

Local organizations will to:

- Have voice?
- Highlight change in context and priorities.
- Ensure the continuity of financial support.



Online data collection process in a war context: adaptations (1)

1. Interviews conducted

Eighteen online interviews were carried out between February and March 2024, slightly fewer than the planned 20. The entire process, including scheduling and execution, took almost two months

2. Greater preparation

A deep understanding of the country's political and social context, language fluency, cultural sensitivity, and knowledge of the ongoing programs were crucial for conducting the interviews.

Given the inability to be on-site due to safety concerns, secure online platforms were used instead.

3. Challenges

Conducting virtual interviews introduced a layer of complexity, especially in addressing the psychological and emotional barriers of the interviewees caused by trauma, oppression, and war.

Ensuring confidentiality, safety, and respecting the asymmetry between interviewer and interviewee were essential.

4. Confidentiality and safety measures

Steps were taken to safeguard the interviewees' privacy, including the use of secure platforms adapted to the preference of interviewees, granting permission for audio/video recording, and respecting their choice to remain anonymous. No raw data was shared with partners, and commitments were made to delete interview footage post-interviews.

5. Delays and adjustments

Interviews took 44 days to complete due to war-related disruptions, including bombings, internet outages, and mobility restrictions. This delayed the subsequent analysis and report delivery. Interviewees' priorities had shifted in light of the war, focusing on democracy, peace, and justice rather than pre-existing program goals like gender issues.

Online data collection process in a war context: adaptations (1)

Partner Organization: *“We are in a constant surveillance system, I mean, in the ID there is a kind of SIM card, they know where you are from your phone. They know that you are going out or coming back, or where you have been or where you have come from, they will follow you through this ID”.*

Partner Organisation : *“There's nothing compared to what we must face now with the war on Gaza, the total destruction of everything in Gaza. I think the latest statistics, you know, 60% of the housing are damaged or void, but I also saw some official figures, more than 2000 economic facilities destroyed”.*

Online data collection process in a war context: adaptations (2)

6. Adapting to the situation

To ensure interviewees' comfort, flexibility was offered regarding scheduling, recording, and choice of communication method. The psychological safety of the participants was prioritised, and empathetic communication was essential.

7. Customising interview questions

The interview questions were tailored to address the specific needs of five Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the individuals involved in the programs. Among the interviewees, five were CSO coordinators, and the rest were program participants. The interviews aimed to capture diverse experiences and perspectives from different roles.

8. Evolving interview dynamics

Interviews often began with the interviewees narrating their current lives and difficulties before transitioning to the formal questions. Organizational leaders described their achievements despite the challenging conditions, and some shared stories about the destruction of offices and displacement of staff. One interviewee had to rely on personal memory since most of their documentation had been destroyed.

9. Reflections and ethical considerations

The evaluator raised personal questions about the appropriateness of conducting interviews during such a time, the meaning of evaluation in a war context, and the human dimension of the role. What does the evaluator's human and ethical responsibility entail in such an environment?

10. Human and cultural sensitivity

Throughout the interviews, the evaluator showed respect and empathy by dressing simply, apologising for the timing of the interviews, and acknowledging the tragic situation in the country. The process underscored the importance of situating oneself mentally in the interviewees' positions to better understand their experiences.

Online data collection process in a war context: adaptations (1)

Partner Organization:

“We moved in the discussion or in the dialogue as civil society organisations from talking about these practical issues to convince the supporting institutions and convince people that we have the freedom to defend ourselves, the freedom to talk about our right to access information, the right to mobility, the right to peace, all rights, ...”

“Also, the priorities in the work have changed, meaning that we will focus on humanitarian issues, the poverty rate was present and has increased, the challenges of society have also changed, so this will be a challenge for us to change many of the strategies and interventions that were in place”.



The evaluation was developed in a context of war, death and famine.

The needs of the population and the program evaluated were clearly other than the feedback that the evaluation could produce.

From this situation emerged a strong feeling of contradictions.

The stress leads us to pose a fundamental question:

Does it make sense to conduct evaluations in such a context?
More broadly, **does it make sense to evaluate in a context marked by war and the vulnerability of human rights?**

The question that underpins the reflection

Hypothesis

Our hypothesis is that there are contexts and situations where the very purpose of evaluation loses its meaning.

- Four major purposes are assigned for evaluation (Greene, 2007; Alkin, 2011)
 - a) Support decision-making and accountability.
 - b) Understand in depth and contextualize the program and its practices.
 - c) Improve the program and the organizational development.
 - d) Promote social justice and equity in the program and in the context in which it is evaluated.

Yet, the needs of the population and the program evaluated were clearly other than the feedback that the evaluation could produce.

Not only, but in fact, evaluation, when approached in an unresponsive manner, could even contribute to discomfort or perpetuate the status quo.



Conclusions

- Not all intended purposes of evaluation can be realized in every context.
- Perhaps the most critical insight is that evaluation, as traditionally practiced, becomes meaningless in contexts of human rights violations, such as during war, where the immediate protection of life and dignity takes precedence over any evaluative process.
- Moreover, evaluation is not inherently neutral; it can potentially cause harm or create a sense of profound dissonance in the face of suffering or injustice.
- For these reasons, we propose that evaluation is not feasible without the guarantee of basic rights.
- **As advocates for evaluation, we believe in its value and purpose. However, we also recognize that in certain extreme circumstances, evaluation may lose its significance entirely.**



Thank you

We will share the paper, if interested: QR

akpaula17@gmail.com
samiakhayo@gmail.com
jligeropolisoc.uc3m.es



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Aida El Khoury

Aproeval and Independent evaluator

Samia Khayyo

Independent evaluator

Juan Andrés Ligeró

Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain



Topics: Collaborative Action, Collaborative Thinking

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Abstract

Some of us have participated recently in an evaluation process during the outbreak of the war in the Middle East. The requirements of the contract forced the evaluation to continue in a context of war, death and famine. The needs of the population and the program evaluated were clearly other than the feedback that the evaluation could produce. The question that arises from this experience: does it make sense to carry out evaluation in this context?

Four major purposes are assigned for evaluation (Greene, 2007; Alkin, 2011)

- a) Support decision-making and accountability.
- b) Understand in depth and contextualize the program and its practices.
- c) Improve the program and the organizational development.
- d) Promote social justice and equity in the program and in the context in which it is evaluated.

The objective of this presentation is to expose the unfeasibility and even inconsistency of achieving some of these purposes without a context of a democratic system and peace.

Recovering the proposals of McDonald (1974), democratic evaluation aims to serve the entire community against the interests of a single group of actors, who are normally those who hold greater power. House and Howe (1999) suggest three criteria for ensuring that evaluation truly contributes to democratic deliberation:

- Represent all relevant points of view, interests, values and stakeholders.
- Dialogue with relevant groups so that their views are represented appropriately and authentically.
- Generate deliberation to ensure that appropriate results and operational decisions are obtained.

In situations of human rights infringement, autocratic governments or clear hegemony of a group of actors (whether due to political, economic, legal or even technical issues), the constructive and democratic game of evaluation cannot occur. Even if there is a sincere and well-intentioned motivation, the contribution of evaluation to the policy debate is nullified by large power structures or social conflagration.

Not only that, but evaluation in these contexts can become a technocratic façade without the possibility of impact that can act, at best, as a monitoring system very far from the evaluation purposes. Furthermore, it runs the risk of giving the appearance of good government in situations of clear injustice for the population. The appeal to evaluation under the democratic ethics of House (2006) is not only a theoretical desideratum, but also a necessary (and pragmatic) condition for carrying out an exercise that can be called evaluation. Our evaluative experience and the theoretical reflections that it has provoked in us make us launch the hypothesis that evaluators, by virtue of being evaluators, make us defenders and activists of democracy, human rights and peace.