

# Images and indicators: mixing participatory methods to build inclusive rigour

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## Abstract

Participatory methods seek to counter the extractive nature of mainstream research methods by putting control into the hands of research subjects. But participation itself does not guarantee against extraction. There is a tension between the desire for researcher-control and the prerogative of community action in participatory methods. How can researchers committed to participation manage this tension? In this paper, we draw on the concepts of “collaborative” and “action-oriented” participatory research to describe how integrating mixed-methodologies can help different research stakeholders attain desirable, fruitful and meaningful levels of ownership and build inclusive rigour. Drawing on our work with participatory indicators and photovoice with conflict affected communities in rural Colombia, we demonstrate how combining different kinds of participatory research methods—in this case, non-visual and visual research—creates opportunities to attend to the sometimes conflicting goals of robust research, policy change and community action. Under the broad umbrella of participatory research, collaborative approaches like participatory indicators and action-oriented approaches like photovoice complement and amplify each other in such settings, embracing complexity and catalyzing multiple ways of ‘knowing-for-action’. The result is participatory research that is attuned to the complexities of conflict-affected settings, inclusively rigorous and potentially transformative.

## Keywords

photovoice, participatory numbers, Colombia, peacebuilding, complexity, ction research

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## Introduction

Participatory methods seek to counter the extractive character of mainstream research methods by putting control of the research process into the hands of communities and empowering them to use the research findings to improve their own circumstances (Wilmsen, 2008). Yet, participation itself does not guarantee against research extraction. Participation can take many forms, and participatory methods that are fully community driven are not always possible or desirable. Researchers might employ participatory methods, working in collaboration with communities to produce knowledge, but maintain control over the core research questions and methods to produce data geared toward impacting policy and theory. However, this can result in fewer opportunities for community ownership and decrease the likelihood of community-oriented outcomes. How can participatory researchers committed to action-oriented research manage this tension? How can they mitigate against the extractive effects of professionally driven research methods and co-build research that is inclusive and directly relevant and impactful for communities?

Drawing on our experience in Colombia, this article explores the following question: how does the integration of different participatory methods in conflict-affected contexts help to create research processes and data that speak to multiple forms of knowing for action (Bradbury & Divecha, 2020) and that is inclusively rigorous (Chambers, 2015)? We propose that mixed participatory methods—particularly those integrating non-visual and visual methods, as well as those producing quantitative as well as qualitative data—hold particular promise for managing the tension between community-driven and researcher-driven approaches in participatory research, creating research that meets the various agendas and needs of researchers, community members, policy-makers and academic audiences. This is especially important in conflict-affected contexts, where the failures of peacebuilding efforts can be linked to their neglect of the local, lived experiences of conflict-affected communities (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015). In this context, our work extends the call made by scholars for a peace that is built from below, that takes as its starting point community understandings of peace (Paffenholz 2010; Firchow, 2018) and that is built on more meaningful, rather than greater, participation (Firchow & Selim, 2022).

There is much variation vis-à-vis what is considered participation in research efforts. In particular there are two spectrums of distinction: a *researcher control spectrum* related to the level of control over the direction of the research by the researchers versus the participants, which varies from extremely open ended and community driven to a more structured process that is collaborative but researcher driven (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018; McTaggart, 1997); and second, an *action spectrum* which demonstrates the amount of commitment on behalf of the researchers to work with research participants in order to transform the research into action leading to positive social change. Ordinarily, action focused participatory research, backed by a normative goal to galvanize people to own and act on the results of the research and the research process, is more community driven than researcher controlled. Participatory action researchers are most committed to transforming their research results into real social change, willing to exchange control for

local impact and action. However when there is a desire to impact change at a policy level, researchers might also want to privilege social science research concerns related to principles of objectivity and open-ended inquiry that generate what is understood to be robust and professionally credible data (Brydon-Miller et al., 2020; Firchow & Gellman, 2021). In this context, researcher controlled participatory methods, which we refer to in this paper as collaborative participatory methods (Firchow & Gellman, 2021), can be more appropriate. We believe our research in Colombia helps action researchers navigating the tension between the prioritization of community driven or researcher controlled approaches by integrating participatory methods to attend to different agendas.

This article provides an overview of our efforts at bringing together two participatory methods: Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) and photovoice, which represent different ends on the participatory research spectrums.<sup>1</sup> EPI draws on researcher-controlled, collaborative methods like focus groups and surveys to transform everyday experiences into measurable indicators for complex concepts like peace (Firchow, 2018; Firchow & Mac Ginty, 2020). Photovoice, on the other hand, is explicitly participant-driven and action-oriented, putting the camera into the hands of subjects to guide the research process (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997). We argue that non-visual and visual participatory methods like EPI and photovoice can enhance each other by offsetting their respective methodological shortcomings and generating multiple forms of knowledge for action that are both rigorous and inclusive.

We are conflict and peace researchers engaged in continual reflection on how knowledge is produced and used, seeking to address concerns we have about the limits of singular methods to provide meaningful opportunities for community driven and action-oriented knowledge creation in complex conflict-affected settings but that can also speak and attend to policy priorities. Effective methodological bricolage is key to pursuing rigour that is inclusive, rather than reductionist, and that can cope with complex and unstable research environments (Chambers, 2015; Apagar et al., 2022; Apgar & Aston, 2022). We therefore sought to combine EPI and photovoice to develop a more holistic and multifaceted participatory approach that could strengthen the outcomes of our research by engaging policymakers and academic audiences with indicator-based data while, at the same time, providing a platform for community-led action and narratives. We believe this has helped us move towards more robust, inclusive and impactful participatory research.

## **Overview and background of methods**

### *Participatory numbers and everyday peace indicators*

As a result of the growing awareness among scholars and practitioners of the limitations of top-down approaches to measuring program results and impact, there has been strong advocacy for bottom-up, collaborative approaches, or for a combination of participatory qualitative and quantitative methods in program design, monitoring and evaluation. Key among these are participatory numbers (Chambers, 2007): “quantitative research information produced by those at the forefront of everyday development struggles” (Gaillard et al., 2016, p. 1000). Participatory numbers have demonstrated several benefits:

they amplify local voices and give a sense of ownership; they produce more inclusive impact assessments of programs and policies (Oosterhoff et al., 2016, 1); and they build skills, strengthen relationships and help communities learn together and communicate to policymakers (Noponen, 2005, 208).

The EPI Project is one effort at participatory numbers. By creating alternative, bottom-up indicators of peace and other hard to measure concepts, it investigates how such bottom-up information can be meaningfully integrated into policy processes. EPI is a multi-step process that involves everyday people in the decision-making processes necessary to create statistics for barometers, indexes or evaluation systems. It was developed in 2012 by Pamina Firchow and Roger Mac Ginty and grew from a dissatisfaction with traditional approaches to measuring peace-related phenomena (Firchow, 2018; Firchow & Mac Ginty, 2020).

In the first stage of EPI data collection, community members generate indicators through guided focus group discussions. Research teams lead three indicator-generating focus groups in each community (typically one each with men, women and youth). The researchers follow a strict set of criteria to select a diverse and representative set of 10 to 15 residents of the community for each focus group. In these focus groups, community members discuss the signs they use and look to in their communities to judge whether or not they are experiencing more or less coexistence or justice, with questions such as “What signs do you look to in order to determine that there is more or less coexistence or justice in your community? Or what signs indicate there is a lack of coexistence or justice?” Second, there is a two-step indicator-verification process wherein community members vet and cull the long list of indicators. First, representatives of the original focus groups reassess their lists and eliminate or add indicators. Next, the facilitators invite the community at large to join the original focus group participants in a larger indicator-voting meeting where each participant casts fifteen votes for their top everyday indicators of coexistence (or justice) in their community.

EPI is rooted in a participatory numbers approach, but like most collaborative methods, it has extractive tendencies. EPI is necessarily a very strictly guided and systematic process that does not allow for much derivation from the data collection protocols. The indicators sourced in each community are removed from the research setting to be analyzed and presented primarily to technocratic and academic audiences. Indeed, we have found that often communities express a certain ambivalence toward the data once we are able to analyze it and present it back to them. This stems from the extractive nature of the research process, which remains under the primary control of the research team throughout the process.

### *Photovoice*

Photovoice, on the other hand, is more of an action-oriented research process, with significant potential for productive engagement with research participants (Jarldom & ‘Deer’, 2020). Photovoice is one of the most popular methods in an ever-expanding portfolio of visual and participatory visual approaches that are being increasingly harnessed by researchers seeking to use the visual as a means to capture, produce, express

and communicate social scientific knowledge (Pauwels, 2010). Pioneered by health researchers Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (Wang & Burris, 1997), photovoice is a flexible and customisable participatory action research method where community members take photographs, and use photography to identify, document, reflect on and narrate issues and stories of concern. The images they create are then used to communicate these issues to public audiences and policy makers with the objective of catalysing social change, often through exhibitions and publications.

Photovoice has been pioneered as a method that seeks to give research participants control in shaping and defining research knowledge that prioritises action, both through the empowerment of the participants and through the harnessing of the images generated to influence change. Underlying the method is an intention to foster a process of critical empowerment in which the participants take action and lead change through actively reflecting and engaging in dialogue around their images, as well as sharing their photography with others. The role of the researcher is one of responsive and open-ended facilitation rather than control and direction. Ethical considerations including questions of informed consent, anonymity and protection are central (Wang & Redwood, 2001), especially given that many photovoice projects work with marginalised, vulnerable or excluded communities, involve complex power dynamics and risk raising expectations for change that they cannot meet.

Closely tied to grassroots activist research, photovoice has been employed in multiple and diverse contexts to counter elitist and extractive knowledge production and to ground research in community needs and realities as a component of social justice (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Its increasing popularity can be understood in relation the many highlighted advantages of the method: it is accessible and engaging; it generates rich qualitative data; it serves to democratise the research process and enable research participants to play an active role in shaping the research focus and impact; it provides opportunities for collaborative learning and validation; and it holds the tantalising promise of catalysing change. In communities coming to terms with the legacy of conflict and violence photovoice has been noted for its positive effects on participant's self-understanding, self-esteem and for catalysing 'an unfolding process of becoming active players in the mediated world of self-representational politics and social struggle' (Lykes et al., 2003:79).

However, critics have noted that photovoice has been applied with varying degrees of interpretation as to what constitutes meaningful and valid participation (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Participants may be involved in taking the pictures, but to what extent do they actively participate in reflecting on and analysing their photographs and in representing them to others to affect change? There is, at times, a disparity between how photovoice is imagined and conceptualised and actually applied and implemented. Some researchers have raised concerns about rigour, the dynamics of voice and participation, small group sizes, agreed procedures around the analysis of photovoice data and over-exaggeration of participation empowerment and the meaningful dissemination of findings and their actual impact on social change (Fairey, 2018; Foster-Fishman et al., 2005; Liebenberg, 2018; Luttrell & Chalfen, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2017). Gubrium and Harper (2013) caution that the user-friendliness of photovoice can result in its misuse. Prins

(2010) points out that the camera is not a culturally or political neutral technology and cameras can, especially in the context of conflict, arouse suspicion. Ultimately there is nothing inherently inclusive or empowering about taking photographs and holding exhibitions. Photovoice, in and of itself, does not provide communities with a voice and opportunities for change but rather the considered and intentional application of the method as a whole (Liebenberg, 2018; Fairey et al., forthcoming).

## **Research design and context: Integration of methods in Colombia**

Colombia is in the midst of an ambitious attempt to promote reconciliation through numerous, overlapping state-led processes. Incorporating multiple national programs, these span over a decade of intertwining peace- and victims-related policies. In this context, we launched the “Everyday Justice” project to identify patterns in how Colombians are experiencing the country’s varied transitional justice processes according to their own locally-rooted notions of success (Dixon & Firchow, 2022). To do so, we have collected everyday indicators of coexistence and justice in three regions of the country, which have all experienced high levels of violence, but where there is variation in both the amount and type of post-conflict state presence.

In each region, photovoice is being implemented in two communities, using a selection of that communities’ Everyday Peace Indicators as prompts for creating peace indicator photo stories. Photovoice is integrated after the first 2 stages of the EPI process (the development and verification of the community peace indicators) are complete and before the survey work gets underway. The photovoice project team is made up of two Colombian-based researchers who work in collaboration with a co-ordinator based within the community and US/UK based advisors providing remote support to the project team. Dispersing the collaborative delivery of the research through a mixed team, we intended to fruitfully combine and balance the biases and identities of the different international, national and community researchers in order to achieve hybrid and plural perspectives and knowledge.

### *Photovoice workshops*

After collecting the Everyday Peace Indicators, the photovoice process takes place over 6 weeks.<sup>2</sup> Information about the photovoice project is circulated in advance through flyers and posters, and via the community EPI coordinators. The project is open to all community members with a view to creating a self-selected group of participants (who have the availability and interest to participate in what is a time intensive process) as well as to facilitate intergenerational and collaborative community work. Interested community members are invited to an informational meeting with the photovoice facilitators after which participants can sign up to join the photovoice group which is set at a maximum of 15 participants.

The photovoice workshops (2 per week, lasting 2-3 hours each) initially concentrate on learning to use the camera, visual literacy exercises, mini photo projects exploring visual technique and storytelling, as well as building friendships and trust between the group and

developing an open dialogue around community issues<sup>3</sup>. Workshops also include ideas and experiments around creative visual strategies that participants can employ to tell stories that cannot be communicated using conventional documentary styles or where identities need to be protected. Each participant has a digital camera that they can take home and use to take photos in between workshops.

During the 2nd week, the *Indicator Photo Story* workshop, the core activity of the EPI/photovoice process, takes place. In this session the photovoice participants examine and discuss a short list of verified everyday peace indicators. The EPI process generates anything from 100-130 indicators in each community. The photovoice group work with a reduced list of 30-40 of these indicators, selected by the EPI research team on a semi-random basis using criteria that considered their popularity and that different interests and groups in the community were fairly represented. Photovoice participants individually select one Everyday Peace Indicator to develop a *Personal Indicator Photo Story* and they also collectively select one or two indicators to develop a *Group Indicator Photo Story*. Undertaking exercises to develop both their personal and collective stories, the participants devise *Individual and Group Indicator Photo Story* plans and spend the next week taking photographs and working collectively and individually on their stories. During the workshops, participants review and edit their images and write or record a text to go with them. The group present their *Individual Indicator Photo Stories* to each other, feeding back on each other's work and working collectively on their *Group Indicator Photo Story*. They then make a final edit, selecting a key images to represent their stories in the community exhibition.

### *The community exhibition*

The community exhibition consists of large vinyl prints that are hung on buildings and in public areas around the locality—generally small, rural villages with a town center (Figure 1). Each vinyl displays an image and text from one of the *Indicator Photo Stories*. The exhibition is launched with a celebratory event to which the community, local leaders and dignitaries are invited. Participants provide a walking tour of the exhibition, presenting their images to audiences. The exhibition is designed to be an event that brings the community together, that celebrates their achievements and generates a dialogue around the issues represented in the images. After this opening event the exhibition remains in the community for an extended period so that visitors can come and see it and it is promoted on social media. Crucially, the exhibition is designed to be mobile in order for the vinyl prints to be transported to another exhibition location, although the permanent exhibition will remain with the community. A final workshop, after the opening, reflects on the experience of the project and exhibition.



**Figure 1.** Hanging the community exhibition, San José de Urama.

## **Combining action oriented and collaborative participatory methodologies to capture complexity in unstable research settings**

It is our proposal that action oriented and collaborative methodologies like EPI and photovoice can enhance each other by offsetting their respective methodological limitations. As researchers working in complex, conflict-affected regions, we are especially cognizant of these advantages for contexts where methods must cope with inherent instability and multiplicity. Peacebuilding, reparations, transitional justice and reconciliation are multi-dimensional, dynamic processes, rather than specific end points, that vary across time and context (Du Toit 2018). There is little agreement on what peace is and how it can be measured (Firchow, 2018). Peacebuilding processes are unpredictable and irregular. Recent peacebuilding research and evaluation scholarship argues that this context demands adaptability and requires that researchers harness both established and innovative mixed methods strategies that embrace complexity by capturing plural perspectives (De Coning, 2018; Pearson 2020; Fairey et al., 2020).

Chambers (2015) highlights how dominant conceptions, that equate research rigour with strict controls and standardised procedures, may have a use in environments which are uniform and predictable but they are ill-equipped to deal with dynamic and unstable contexts. He argues for an expansive re-framing of rigour so that it can be inclusive rather than reductionist and better cope with complexity and advocates an eclectic methodological pluralism to ensure the capture of diverse perspectives and forms of data. Building on Chamber's thinking an emerging framework identifies effective methodological bricolage as a key dimension of building inclusive rigour in peacebuilding research and learning (Apagar et al., 2022). Our strategic decision to mix and integrate action oriented and collaborative participatory methods was motivated by a desire to open spaces for community defined and driven peace whilst simultaneously contributing to the multiple

agendas that peacebuilding research needs to attend to: research, community, policy and programming. The value of combining EPI and photovoice derives from the distinct benefits that the methods bring to each other, which ultimately enhances the quality, impact, inclusivity and rigour of both. Our thinking can be explained through three interconnected elements that capture our goals in bringing the two methods together.

Firstly, the combination of action oriented and collaborative participatory methods, in particular visual and non-visual methods, allows for more holistic research data and measurements tools, that capture multiplicity and complexity by generating multiple forms of 'knowing-for-action' (Bradbury & Divecha, 2020). As singular methods, both EPI and photovoice present distinct advantages as well as limitations. EPI generates concrete, trackable measures of peace and conflict that communicate needs and priorities for communities and policymakers, however, in transforming and distilling rich, qualitative data into measurable lists of indicators, the potential for engaging those who produce the data is not prioritized and some of the contextual significance and meaning behind the indicators is lost. Photovoice extends the power of mixed method, qualitative-quantitative, participatory research like EPI to both capture and represent the diversity of lived experiences as it generates multi-dimensional, narratively rich data which is directly representative of participant's day to day realities. Researchers have argued that visual analysis is central to understanding international politics (Bleiker, 2017; Callahan, 2020; Harman, 2019; Lydon, 2018) and that the visual methods can help to access subjective human experience and emotions that are left out of conventional knowledge production (Rose, 2007). By allowing direct access to the positionality of others, photovoice reveals intersections and insights into how people see themselves in the world at the same time as bridging the gap between abstract research questions and the life-worlds of participants (Nyman, 2021).

At the same time, EPI enriches photovoice by rooting it in structured and collaborative community consultation process (Firchow & Gellman, 2021, 3). Photovoice projects often work with small numbers of participants whose images cannot be assumed to be representative or to speak for their wider community. Unlike other participatory methods, photovoice does not emphasize the building of consensus across participants (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005). It captures multiplicity and subjective experience which places limits on the findings that can be deduced from photovoice data alone. However, combined with EPI, which is based on a wider community consultation and structured voting process that involves larger numbers of participants and a cross section of different groups according to gender and age, photovoice becomes more reflective of and accountable to wider community concerns. The Everyday Peace Indicators presented to the photovoice participants are already vetted and ranked by the broader community. The photovoice process then allows a group of participants to focus on particular issues in their community for several weeks at a time. This allows photovoice to expand and attend to, not only the specific, subjective experiences of the photovoice participants, but to pay attention to a range of experiences of the community as a whole. In the 'dispersed and ill-defined domain' of visual methods (Pauwels, 2010:545) where there are no standard modes of analysis (Rose, 2007), EPI provides a framework in which photovoice data is grounded, interpreted and analyzed.

Combined, the two methods allow the researcher to draw on different representations of reality and forms of knowing—from the textual richness of focus groups, the specificity and

representativity of indicators and surveys, and the visual, narrative storytelling of photographs—to construct a more holistic and inclusive picture of what matters to peace in that particular community. The substance and quantitative robustness of the indicators and participatory numbers process combined with the narrative richness of photovoice allows for the generation of data and knowledge that is layered, abundant and communicable. The photovoice images and testimonies make the peace indicators visible, rooting them in stories, metaphors and symbols, that communicate the significance and relevance of the indicators to public and policy audiences while the EPI process ensures that the images and stories are substantive and representative of community-wide concerns.

Second, the combination of action oriented and collaborative methodologies enables less extractive and more locally relevant and productive research processes, promoting a more sustained presence of the research project and enriching the relationship between researchers and participants. While the EPI process originates from an embrace of participatory and locally-rooted research, it can still be fundamentally extractive. In Colombia, the EPI process is being used for both academic and policy goals, but we have seen a limited ability of our research team to meaningfully “return” the indicators and findings to the localities where they originated. Furthermore, there is an analytical step in between data gathering and data reporting, in which the EPI research team uses their own theoretical frames to analyze and interpret, further distancing the data from the people with whom it originates.

In the context of conflict where affected communities have often lost so much, the arts and creativity make important contributions to supporting healing and re-building processes, bringing communities together to memorialise the past and look to the future (Baily, 2019; Cohen, Roberto Guitierrez Varea, and Walker 2012; Fairey & Kerr, 2020; Hawksley & Mitchell, 2020; Lydon, 2018). Photovoice is no exception, engaging participants over longer periods of time than the typical EPI process. This fosters a stronger and longer-lasting relationship between the research team and community members. In our project, the average EPI process is one-two weeks, while the average photovoice process lasts six weeks, which leads to more engagement and locally driven research outcomes. Each photovoice community produces a public exhibition of photographs hung in public spaces, which stays in the community, allowing for numerous public events and dialogues about the photos and the stories they tell about each locality and its emergence from war.

Third, the combination of action oriented and collaborative methodologies unlocks opportunities for enhanced advocacy efforts that raise community voices and local actions over which research participants can exert more direct ownership. Combined, EPI and photovoice create and amplify opportunities for advocacy and actions at multiple levels: within communities, with public audiences and in policy and programming circles. In addition to the public community exhibitions, participants identify and document needs and priorities to take collective action that supports community level change through the extended photovoice workshops and engagements. In this way, photovoice can bring community action to the EPI process, which normally informs outsiders by influencing and shaping their programming but does not necessarily foster internal, bottom-up action. In Colombia, photovoice has provided opportunities for local – national interactions with the project attracting national partners such as the Colombian Truth Commission keen to extend their community level engagement. Visual methods bring distinct benefits not only to engage and support community driven

processes and partnerships but also to communicate these issues to outside audiences. Images travel and circulate easily and rapidly. This is especially pertinent to research in difficult and hard to access contexts, such as post conflict settings where conflict affected communities are located in rural and isolated areas or are hard to access due to security issues. When these community members cannot travel to ensure their voices are heard in national and international arenas, their images and stories can. Making their peace indicators visible in the form of photographs and testimonies, ensures community voices are directly represented in their own words in exhibitions, in reports, in the media and online.

Critics of photovoice have argued that while it serves as a catalyst to action, there is limited evidence that demonstrates its actual impact on policy (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005). Integrated with EPI, photovoice becomes more concrete, representative and focused around a particular issue with multiple layers of outcome focused activities for different audiences. Images need to be harnessed and disseminated through different networks to achieve influence and impact. The standard protocols involved in the researcher controlled EPI process and its quantitative, mixed methods character gives the photovoice images and testimonies increased credibility and more empirical weight with policy audiences, exposing them to new networks of influence. In this way, the images and indicators ground and leverage each other and create new avenues to communicate and affect change.

## Outcomes from initial project rollout

Whilst the question of community impact is discussed in detail elsewhere (Fairey et al. forthcoming), this section shares the unexpected outcomes from the first phase of the project. The initial rollout was in the municipality of Dabeiba in the department of Antioquia and took place between April – December 2020, with activities adapted for the pandemic.<sup>4,5</sup> Two communities were selected according to a variety of criteria, including accessibility and proximity to regions where the Colombian Truth Commission had sought to establish a more local presence: San José de Urama y Las Cruces. The EPI photovoice process was designed to enable local ownership and to support community driven action and change without any pre-defined objectives as to what form that might take, as long as it was formulated around the everyday indicators developed by the community. This open-endedness was vital in order to ensure participants could actively define and decide on how to use the project, indicators and knowledge it created without being restricted by pre-determined objectives. In both communities, we found that the EPI photovoice workshops catalysed unexpected community level action with participants deciding to take collective actions in relation to the group photovoice indicator stories, which represented some of the most highly voted indicators from the EPI indicator generation phase.

For the collective indicator stories in San José de Urama one of the two photovoice groups chose the indicator: *“The community with the support of the church and the JAC maintain the cemetery”*.<sup>6</sup> The state of cemetery which had become overgrown and fallen into disrepair was a source of great concern to the community. The Photography Collective of Urama made an extended photo story cataloguing the dilapidation of the cemetery. In their text, they described how “the deterioration of the sacred burial ground is evidence of the forgetting of our dead. The weeds devour the tombs just as the mind erases

memories” (Figure 2). After going out to document the decay, the group decided they wanted to do something about it. They convened a work party (*minga*), and over two days a group of 80 community members from across the village transformed the cemetery, clearing the vegetation, re-painting structures and making repairs (Figure 3).



**Figure 2.** Indicator: The community with the support of the church and the JAC maintain the cemetery. ‘At one time a woman, in the final stage of her illness, resisted dying because she did not want to be taken to that neglected place, the cemetery. The deterioration of that sacred place shows our forgetfulness of our dead, the weeds are devoured the tombs as in the mind memories are erased. Isn’t it just the right thing to unite to maintain it, honor its memory and keep this place of transit to eternal life beautiful?’ Photos by the Urama Photography Collective.



**Figure 3.** Indicator: The community with the support of the church and the JAC maintain the cemetery. ‘At one time a woman, in the final stage of her illness, resisted dying because she did not want to be taken to that neglected place, the cemetery. The deterioration of that sacred place shows our forgetfulness of our dead, the weeds are devoured the tombs as in the mind memories are erased. Isn’t it just the right thing to unite to maintain it, honor its memory and keep this place of transit to eternal life beautiful?’ Photos by the Urama Photography Collective.

In the second village, Las Cruces, a roadside community which has not received any state-led post-conflict programs, there is tension around what community members feel is a disproportionate amount of state-led support for ex-combatant communities which stands in contrast to the lack of provision and services for communities like their own that were victims of the violence. Viewing this as a significant obstacle to peaceful co-existence, the photography collective of Cruces chose as the indicator they wanted to photograph: “*Campesinos and ex-combatants have equal opportunities*”. In their community they documented the failure of the state to maintain the road and the lack of adequate housing and community spaces. Discussing their project, they recognized that they were distrustful of ex-combatants and held certain prejudices against them. They decided in order to properly photograph and tell the story of the indicator they needed to visit an ex-combatant community to engage in a dialogue and establish a direct



**Figure 4.** Indicator: Campesinos and ex-combatants have equal opportunities. ‘Thinking about it, it is not that it is bad that they have opportunities because in reality all human beings make mistakes and life gives the privilege of allowing people to vindicate themselves. What is truly complex and degrading is they have more privileges than the victims. Look at how our roads are, the lack of university opportunities for our high school graduates, the lack of employment. They get the benefits of productive projects. Us, we are the victims, and you cannot see the support of the State, but with the ex-combatants the photo comes and goes, the help comes and goes, the jobs, the good roads. We also deserve the same.’ Photos by the Cruces Photography Collective.

relationship with members of the ex-combatant community. They organised an exchange with a nearby collective of the *Espacios Territoriales de Capacitación y Reincorporación* (ETCRs), an ex-combatant settlement in their region which developed into an autonomous village through the Colombian state's collective reintegration programs for demobilized members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC). They toured the community and took photographs, sharing their images and discussing the issues with participants of the ETCR collective. Photography became a shared activity and means to exchange experiences. Reflecting on the visit, the photovoice participants said the exchange allowed them to deconstruct their own negative assumptions about ex-combatants and to build a perspective that pushed beyond their prejudices. The ex-combatant community did have better services and facilities but were also working hard to reform by building new livelihoods and fostering a culture of peace in their communities (Figures 4 and 5). The visit served to de-stigmatise the ex-combatants, reduce tensions and established a direct link between the two communities.

In both localities the photovoice process sparked actions around pre-existing community concerns that had been identified and discussed through the everyday peace indicator process. It was not that photovoice in and of itself was the reason for an increase in



**Figure 5.** Indicator: Campesinos and ex-combatants have equal opportunities. 'Thinking about it, it is not that it is bad that they have opportunities because in reality all human beings make mistakes and life gives the privilege of allowing people to vindicate themselves. What is truly complex and degrading is they have more privileges than the victims. Look at how our roads are, the lack of university opportunities for our high school graduates, the lack of employment. They get the benefits of productive projects. Us, we are the victims, and you cannot see the support of the State, but with the ex-combatants the photo comes and goes, the help comes and goes, the jobs, the good roads. We also deserve the same.' Photos by the Cruces Photography Collective.

community engagement, but rather that it acted as a catalyst for collective actions around long-standing issues and concerns because it had been applied intentionally and carefully to build on existing community strengths and the everyday peace indicators. Despite the tensions that emerge when working with images in security sensitive settings and the limits of what the participants could safely photograph and discuss in a context where their lives were constricted by ongoing conflict and security concerns, participants noted the healing and dialogical power of the photovoice process (Fairey et al., forthcoming). In providing them with a space to come together to reflect on what were the key ingredients for justice and co-existence in their community, the participants were able to talk across generations, heal, share stories, recognise what has been lost and celebrate their future. Their photos inspired community action and dialogue, transforming their streets into open air peace museums. Oscar Botero, one resident of San José de Urama explained,

‘... This town has lived a lot of violence, we all know that, and ... it is so different and beautiful to go out and to see the photos, to see the walls full of art and poetry. A few years ago... you would go out and see the walls full of death threats. What there is now on these walls is a tribute to life’.

## Conclusion

This article has outlined how combining action oriented and collaborative participatory methodologies has the potential to raise community voices, build inclusive rigour and create multiple forms of knowledge for action that create opportunities for multiple level impact on research, policy, programming interventions and, perhaps most importantly, for communities. This allows for more dynamism and flexibility along the researcher control and action axes and, ultimately, a more desirable balance between extractive, transformative and locally driven research processes. Our research demonstrates the importance of adaptive, mixed methods participatory research that attends to community priorities in complex, dynamic research settings. Building on research that argues it is possible to construct and use methodological tools that satisfy inclusive, bottom-up approaches and methodological rigour and strictures (Firchow & Mac Ginty, 2020), we propose that multi-faceted research that combines both action oriented and collaborative participatory methodologies, such as EPI and photovoice, unlocks different aspects of everyday realities and allows us to embrace multiple and richer ways of knowing-for-action while building rigour that is inclusive rather than reductive. The resulting data allows actors to be more accountable and provides useful information to both research and community action agendas. The two methods work to complement and enhance the other by countering each other’s limitations and amplifying the potential of both to create new insights that can impact change.

Researchers are often presented with a false dilemma that suggests they need to choose between approaches and methods that attend to either researcher led or community driven action agendas, leading to research that is either primarily extractive or primarily transformative. However, we have demonstrated that by integrating action oriented and collaborative mixed participatory methods, researcher’s capacities can expand to produce

research results that can meet expectations for robust metrics while being inclusive and catalysing community action and impact.

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### Notes

1. The EPI/photovoice project is funded by Humanity United and is associated with the Colombian Truth Commission.
2. The initial EPI/photovoice approach was developed over a 3-day workshop in Bogota with the entire EPI Colombia research team (which included 6 researchers responsible for delivering the EPI process and 3 researchers responsible for delivering the photovoice process) and input from donors and partners.
3. Food was key in supporting and expanding group dialogue with participants sharing a meal at many workshops and using this as a time to extend their conversations in an informal and communal atmosphere.
4. See: 'Dabeiba (Antioquia), más allá de la fosa común', *El Espectador*, 3rd July 2020. <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia-20/paz-y-memoria/dabeiba-antioquia-mas-alla-de-la-fosa-comun-article/> and 'How Photography can Build Peace and Justice'. *The Conversation*, 20th August 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-photography-can-build-peace-and-justice-in-war-torn-communities-166143>
5. The EPI photovoice research was getting underway in March 2020 just as the COVID 19 pandemic hit Colombia. The project paused whilst extensive COVID protocols were developed and approved in conjunction with the community, authorities, partners and donors. COVID adaptations included distanced workshops, mask wearing, hybrid working with the photovoice group also staying active and in touch via a Whatsapp group and routine COVID testing for the research facilitators.
6. *Juntas de Acción Comunal (JAC)* are locally organized clubs unique to Colombia, which help address problems at the community level.

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