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## ARTICLE

# Participatory evaluation and digital tools in humanitarian aid settings

## Evaluación participativa y herramientas digitales en escenarios de ayuda humanitaria

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**Abstract:** Information gathering may obviously be a complex process during a humanitarian crisis for both relief workers and its victims. Faced with the inherent difficulties, digital tools have much to contribute to the different phases of participatory evaluation. This article presents partial results of the Erasmus+ project, KA2- Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices (InovHumbRE Projects). The main aim has been to analyse data on the participatory evaluation methods used by the different institutions/agencies involved in a project and within the context of crisis situations. A mixed type of study was selected using a descriptive and interpretative approach of a non-generalisable nature based on an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data provided by the staff of non-governmental organisations working in crisis situations in Spain. The cohort was comprised of 14 respondents from sundry social agencies and organisations. A questionnaire was used with 26 items that followed an open-ended and closed response format. The results show that the use and development of technology can favour social interventions and participatory evaluations in certain projects or crisis situations.

**Keywords:** Social work, Participatory evaluation, ICT, Humanitarian aid, Social organisations.

**Resumen:** En situaciones de crisis humanitaria, la recopilación de información puede ser compleja, tanto para el personal del proyecto como para los beneficiarios. Frente a todas estas dificultades, el Trabajo Social Digital tiene mucho que aportar a las distintas fases de la evaluación participativa. En el presente artículo se presentan resultados parciales del proyecto Erasmus+, KA2- Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices (InovHumbRE Projects). El objetivo principal de este trabajo fue analizar información sobre qué métodos de evaluación participativa se utilizan desde las distintas instituciones/entidades que participaron en el proyecto y en el contexto de las situaciones de emergencia. Se optó por un estudio de tipo mixto desde un enfoque descriptivo e interpretativo de tipo no generalizable y basado en el análisis de datos cuantitativos y cualitativos de profesionales de entidades sin ánimo de lucro que trabajan en situaciones de emergencia en España. El número de participantes fue de 13 informantes de diferentes organizaciones y entidades sociales. Se utilizó un cuestionario que contó con un total de 30 ítems que siguieron un formato de respuesta abierta y cerrada. Los resultados evidencian que el uso y desarrollo de la tecnología, desde el enfoque del Trabajo Social Digital, puede favorecer las intervenciones sociales y las evaluaciones participativas en determinados proyectos o situaciones de crisis.

**Palabras clave:** Trabajo social, Evaluación participativa, TIC, Ayuda humanitaria, Entidades sociales.

## 1. Introducción

The community of experts (e.g., Abrisketa and Pérez de Armiño, 2000; Humanitarian Coalition, no date; Montes del Castillo and Montes Martínez, 2020; Rouleau and Redwood-Campbell, 2009) agree on defining humanitarian aid as the material or logistical assistance provided for humanitarian purposes in response to crisis situations, such as those caused by natural or manmade disasters (e.g., wars, armed conflicts, and persecution). They also indicate that this aid serves the following purposes: save lives, alleviate suffering, and uphold human dignity, which are wholly consistent with the goals of social work, as «an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people.» (IFSW, no date, paragraph 1).

The triggering of a humanitarian crisis requires the immediate intervention of relief workers and, besides their actual hands-on presence, psychosocial support and mentoring for the victims is vital in these circumstances, whereby their task becomes crucial for myriad reasons. Ábalo, (2011, p. 138) reports that «the social worker's task is critical in building social capital for the sustainable relief of the disaster and its management». In turn, Castillo de Mesa and López Peláez (2019) contend that these workers in social emergencies have a strategic task to perform in keeping with the one mentioned by Ábalo and also as the ones responsible for the social services provided for the users of existing resources.

Social or relief workers are responsible for finding and managing these resources once they have assessed the population's needs; they activate networks of communication and solidarity; set the targets for their interventions; guarantee action and coordination measures involving the different organisations and institutions, and foster social promotion and people's resilience. In addition, they take charge of providing mechanisms that favour development, understanding that, within the context of the disaster, the aforesaid resilience is not only individual as it also extends to the entire population affected, therefore becoming collective. Their role is also significant in the development of programmes for the prevention of catastrophes and their recovery, designing scenarios and planning means and measures to tackle humanitarian crises. Furthermore, from the perspective of human rights, they champion human dignity, engagement, transparency, the fair use of resources, and accountability, whilst also ensuring that governments observe their duty to protect people's rights during a catastrophe (Barney, 2020).

Despite the only recent appearance of e-Social Work, its radius of action is increasing, An environment of digital infrastructures and social media that connects individuals all over the world enables them to reach places that were hitherto difficult or practically impossible to reach (García-Castilla et al., 2018).

López Peláez and Marcuello Servós (2018) find that these technologies are altering the nature and performance of social intervention because «the range of digital procedures and devices has opened a broader dimension in matters of research, therapies, administration and management in a way that has a mainstream impact on Social Work and on social intervention as a whole, as well as on traditional settings, reconfiguring areas of specialisation» (p. 28), one of which is undoubtedly humanitarian aid.

Indeed, and related to this ambit, the European Parliamentary Research Service (2019) has studied the significance of technological developments, especially digital ones, when preventing and reducing human suffering during social emergencies, and it finds that they may act as facilitators for addressing the joint challenges that are faced in the aid process, furthermore allowing for the active involvement of different players in assessing their impact. Moreover, it sees them as «a way forward to better address the needs of those affected by humanitarian disaster, and to address the challenges faced in humanitarian assistance» (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019, p. 10).

If, due to its very nature, e-Social Work uses these technological innovations, when we refer to humanitarian aid it may exploit them to their full potential in the different stages of the intervention, including the evaluation of past interventions, in consonance with the pledge to transparency and the due and proper management of resources, as features that every social project should have (Páez et al., 2020).

Although evaluation processes involve different models and approaches, since the beginning of the 1990s, a growing number of international organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have recognised the need to undertake more participatory processes to garner a more thorough understanding of the issues at stake, by incorporating the perspective of the stakeholders involved. The latter, what's more, may provide pertinent feedback for the design and management of projects (Roche, 1999), playing an active role that especially helps to empower the beneficiaries, as in the case of the methodological strategy of participatory evaluation.

We are reminded of the phrase used by Madsen (2007) and McLaughlin (2009): users are «experts by experience», with social work providing them with a context in which they can resolve their problems, in cooperation with social workers (Kustec, 2020). It is here that the diagnosis acquires a particular importance, namely, the recipients' promotion and empowerment through the use of participatory methods (Melero and Fleitas, 2015; Trull-Oliva et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, it is not always easy to conduct a participatory evaluation of humanitarian aid on the ground. As reported by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1999, the nature of social emergencies renders it necessary to consider that the evaluation criteria in these kinds of situations are not the same as the ones commonly applied in other types of projects (e.g., in development). Kaiser (2002) stresses that one of the difficulties facing evaluators is that host countries often reject participatory approaches, adding that it should be noted that «beneficiary populations cannot be trusted to answer honestly for fear of losing assistance, that methodological know-how is missing, that no baseline data exists against which to measure change and that the obstacles represented by logistical constraints are too great to overcome for the sake of beneficiary involvement in evaluation processes». (p. 15).

The Good Enough Guide (Oxfam, 2007) stresses that the gathering of information in social emergencies may be difficult and dangerous, for both relief staff and the beneficiaries. Furthermore, it cannot be ignored that there are power relationships (Falkenburg, 2021) and that the beneficiaries' involvement may be difficult to arrange due to factors such as the organisation of communities, level of education, and local politics, for example (PROLOG, 2007).

Faced with all these difficulties, according to Rotondo (2001) e-Social Work has a lot to contribute to the different stages of a participatory evaluation (preparatory measures, design of the plan, knowledge building, and the use and disclosure of results), supporting and extending the interventions of in situ social work. For example, the monitoring of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) may lead to the creation of working parties, reveal power relationships, and provide the latest data on the situation in general. It may also shed light on behaviour, and users' needs and demands that they themselves have expressed, which help to define the prior measures required for undertaking the process of participatory evaluation and enable the plan to be drawn up, reducing the risks for all those involved. Likewise, regarding the final stage of the process (use and disclosure of the results), they permit the results to be disseminated and may be used for assessing the interventions' impact, as proposed by Castillo de Mesa and López Peláez (2019).

While social media allow users to interact and orchestrate networks of communication and solidarity (Castillo de Mesa and López Peláez, 2019), digital social workers also have access to collaborative working platforms and videoconferencing, which allow for the real-time organisation of workshops whenever these cannot be held face-to-face, catering for dialogue and group knowledge building, leading to consensus and agreement upon commitments, as the steps that lie at the heart of participatory evaluation.

In sum, this article presents the partial results of the project Erasmus+, KA2-Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices (InovHumbRE Projects). This research's overriding goal was to analyse data on the participatory evaluation methods used by the various institutions/agencies involved in the project and within the context of crisis situations. In addition, it pursued the following aims: 1) assess those measures of participatory evaluation that have been undertaken by the different agencies involved in the study; 2) identify the main strengths and weaknesses of the evaluations that agencies have undertaken thus far; 3) detect those participatory evaluation measures that the agencies have applied in response to crisis situations; and 4) investigate those digital tools that agencies use to conduct online evaluations.

## **2. Method**

The decision was made to use a blended study involving a descriptive and interpretative approach of a non-generalisable nature based on an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data provided by staff employed by a series of agencies.

### **2.1. Participants**

Purposive sampling was used based on an analysis of the main NGOs that operate in emergency situations in Spain. The Magtel Foundation arranged the recruitment of the participants, making use also of the ease and feasibility of access to the sample units. For increasing the response rate, the participants were asked to distribute the questionnaire to their peers in a snowball process that would increase participation. The following criteria were applied for selecting participants: be a manager or member of staff of reference NGOs within the field of social services in Spain involved in crisis situations.

The final sample consisted of 14 respondents from different social agencies and organisations. The data for each one of them referred to the agencies in which they work are shown in the results section.

## **2.2. Instrument**

A questionnaire was used that consisted of 26 items with an open-ended and closed answer format. The instrument was applied asynchronously by emailing an access link (Bryman, 2012). Its design was based on the following three criteria (Flick, 2018): focus on the study's pertinent issues, on the research purpose, and on the process for understanding the research purpose.

This involved a brief introduction to the research and followed a funnel logic in the questionnaire's development, beginning with general questions and then narrowing them down to more specific matters for engaging the participants and focusing their attention on each one of the research topics. This meant that the items were distributed into the instrument's four main sections:

- 1) Sociodemographic data on the participating agencies and the participatory evaluation they conduct. (8 items: 1-8)
- 2) Use of participatory evaluation by the agencies. (7 items: 9-15)
- 3) Participatory evaluation in the response to crisis situations. (11 items: 16-26)
- 4) Participatory evaluation and online digital tools (4 items: 27-30)

## **2.3. Procedure**

The questionnaire on participatory evaluation in crisis situations was administered using the Google Workspace Forms application in June and July 2021. Before sending the link, a review was conducted by several colleagues in the research process as per the criterion of intersubjective verifiability specific to such processes (Pérez, 1994). The use of this instrument proved to be flexible, and reduced the cost of the research in terms of resources and distribution times. Furthermore, this arrangement minimised the social desirability of the informants' responses as the researchers were not directly involved or present during the narration of the testimonies (Fricker and Schonlau, 2002). Finally, the questionnaire was administered after seeking the participants' consent once they had been informed of the study purpose, in keeping with the Declaration of Helsinki's ethical principles.

## **2.4. Data analysis**

The content of the respondents' testimonies was systematically processed using the database that was automatically generated in Google Sheets. The quantitative data were analysed through descriptive statistics, percentages, and frequencies. In turn, the qualitative data were treated according to the content of the respondents' answers and by systematically processing the statements made in the open-ended questions. The structuring and organisation of the information in the free answers involved the creation of a simple category system that followed a process of open coding the units of information provided into different categories (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2019; Strauss and Corbin, 2002).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Participating agencies and the participatory evaluation they conduct

The questionnaire was answered by 14 representatives at 13 agencies, all of which were Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), as follows: Red Cross, CODENAF, Open Arms, AIRE NGO, Asociación de Apoyo al Pueblo Sirio – Association in Support of the Syrian People (AAPS), the Spanish branch of Childhood without Borders, Asociación Diversidades, Prolibertas Foundation (two representatives), DIACONIA, the Spanish branch of Chemists without Borders, Paz y Bien Association, Plan Internacional España, and the Sevilla Acoge Foundation. 71.4% (N = 10) of the study’s respondents reported conducting participatory evaluations, while the remaining 28.6% (N = 4) said they did not.

##### *Type of participatory evaluation conducted by each agency*

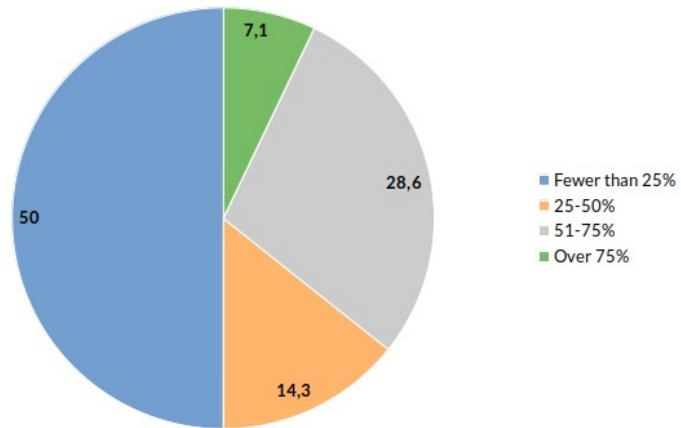
The qualitative data on the different kinds of participatory evaluations these NGOs conduct correspond to the following categories (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Type of participatory evaluation conducted by each agency.

Internal evaluations	Final evaluations on plans, programmes and projects focusing on staff’s own performance. (9 testimonies)	«Internal or external evaluations (largely involving local universities).» «General evaluation of projects undertaken.» «Interim and final evaluation of subsidies/external and internal cooperation projects in development and humanitarian aid, real-time review and post-distribution monitoring.» «Evaluation of plans involving strategy, equality, quality, and human resources.»
	Interim participatory evaluations for monitoring and resolving issues and/or reaching agreements (3 testimonies).	«Interim and final evaluation of subsidies/external and internal cooperation projects in development and humanitarian aid, real-time review and post-distribution monitoring.»
	Evaluations of training courses (2 testimonies).	«Evaluation of training courses.»
External evaluations	External evaluations on satisfaction with the attention received conducted by (3 testimonies).	«We have conducted an evaluation with beneficiaries using a final questionnaire on the satisfaction of refugees.» «Internal or external evaluations (largely involving local universities).»

*Participatory evaluations: internal capacity and subcontracting*

As regards the question on the agencies' internal capacity for conducting participatory evaluation. 85.7% (N = 12) of the participants stated they had enough internal capacity for conducting participatory evaluations, as opposed to 14.3% (N = 2) that considered they did not.



**Figure 1.** Agency staff involved in or responsible for the evaluations.

*Training requirements for participatory evaluation*

Regarding the training in the field of participatory evaluation that the participants considered they required to improve such processes, 12 open-ended responses were received that were classified into three groups (Table 2).

**Tabla 2.** Demandas en la formación sobre la evaluación participativa.

Quantitative and qualitative impact indicators of final and procedural evaluations by the different agents involved in the survey	(4 testimonies) «Training in impact evaluation»; «Learn how to adapt the indicators to focus on real needs.»
Evaluation methods and techniques	(6 testimonies). «evaluation techniques». «methods for Managing for Development Results (MfDR)», «Training in evaluation applied to international cooperation», «methodology for evaluating a community and participatory approach.»
Designing an evaluation plan	(2 testimonies). «Learning about the methods most suited to each moment at the organisation or to each process», «Definition of standard forms or protocols for evaluating the same indicators.»



### **3.2. Agencies' use of participatory evaluation**

#### *The participatory evaluation methods used*

85.7% (N=12) of the respondents report that their agencies used participatory evaluation as a method as opposed to 14.3% (N = 2) that did not. These methods have been used in different contexts such as training and employment or within a community or educational setting in social intervention projects. Nevertheless, they have also been used at different stages of the evaluation process, as illustrated by the following testimony:

(...) major projects, building schools, workshops for women, etc. Some tools involve stakeholder participation in all the stages of the evaluation process, from making the decision to evaluate through to the final assessment of the results. Existing local resources and knowledge provide the platform for launching the IFEE<sup>1</sup> process. The evaluation is embedded within the learning cycle as the means for achieving more participatory development. (Participant 11, item 9)

From another perspective, participatory evaluation has been used in «questionnaires with open-ended answers and discussion groups, where the main method applied involves semi-structured interviews.» (Participant 3, Item 9). This is also the case in satisfaction surveys involving both hired staff and beneficiaries, as revealed by the following testimony:

(...) We have conducted a self-assessment among employees and then undertaken a joint evaluation with the project's coordinators. The aim is to verify whether employees and coordinators have the same perception of the results obtained. It is taken as an analysis of the synchrony, subjectivity or different viewpoints of the those of us involved in the projects. This would involve, on the one hand, self-assessment, internal evaluation and joint evaluation. On the other hand, the questionnaires administered to refugees involve an evaluation of the programme and their satisfaction. The purpose of this analysis is to understand the programme's difficulties and its successes. (Participant 7, Item 9).

The results show how a participatory evaluation has been applied in the launch of processes for identifying, implementing, and monitoring projects through such techniques as observation and group dynamics involving semi-structured dialogues with key respondents; dialogue techniques with children focusing on ludic/recreational activities, drawings, etc.; questionnaires, and discussion groups for drawing up plans on strategy, quality, and equality, for example.

#### *Main challenges involved in conducting participatory evaluations*

The respondents addressed the different challenges that need to be considered regarding participatory evaluations. One of the main ones involved boosting the participation of those involved in the intervention, as well as that of local players. A further challenge mentioned by the participants involves the complexity of undertaking a participatory evaluation in wartime settings. There are also challenges related to the actual design of the evaluation's tools, methodology, and techniques:

<sup>1</sup> Spanish acronym for the method of «Identificación, Formulación, Ejecución y Evaluación» [identification, Drafting, implementation and Evaluation]



«Adapting the methodology and techniques to suit each context, above all in humanitarian crisis/emergency situations, that the tools correspond to the culture and idiosyncrasies of the interventions, considering the differences between men and women, girls and boys, the lack of access to communities for reasons of safety and COVID-19, the lack of funds for training the staff conducting the evaluation and of teams headed by women. Besides the following: the chaos of humanitarian emergencies, the lack of reference data, high staff turnover, humanitarian crises in remote areas with damaged infrastructure, pressure of time on the affected population and the fact people may not have enough time to take part in an evaluation, overly ambitious terms of reference and limited resources, and the absence of clearly defined responsibilities among stakeholders.» (Participant 1, Item 10)

Consideration should also be taken of the lack or restriction of resources for conducting these evaluations.

#### *Main lessons learned in conducting participatory evaluations in your area of work*

Among the learning and strengths of the participatory evaluation for their area of work is the possibility of gathering different perceptions of the people involved, which results in a better understanding of the environment, in an adjustment of expectations and in a possible improvement of the intervention. As these testimonies show:

The richness in the points of view when approaching the evaluation is the most interesting thing, the greater the participation of actors belonging to different fields of action, the greater the effectiveness of the product achieved in the evaluation.

The main learning is the enormous difference between the expectations of the technical staff and the expectations of the participants, with the consequent divergence not so much in the general assessment as in the aspects that are considered relevant.

In turn, "having to explain to the participants the reasons for the need and advantages of carrying out these evaluations" can lead to the idea that in participatory evaluation it is important that all parties are convinced of its usefulness" and that "a permanent evaluation is necessary, that we cannot act in isolation with the actors of our activities in general. That there is more than one institution to collaborate with, that there is always room for improvement (...)".

#### *Using participatory evaluation methods in other parts of the project cycle*

The majority of survey participants stated that their organisations did use participatory evaluation methods in other parts of the project cycle - 7 (53.8%) compared to 6 (46.2%). Participants stated that "we always advocate for process evaluations, whereby we set up a priori evaluations at different points in the intervention so that the final evaluation has the greatest possible impact. Each moment of the project and its evaluation involves a level of meetings with the actors involved, which as a general rule tend to be focused on the before and after of the action. This means that if we find incidents or deviations, we have time to redirect the intervention and ultimately achieve the projected results and objectives". Likewise, they also opt for other methods such as "Participant observation during the identification phase" or "focus groups for

the design of campaigns (within the implementation), committees for the development of activities, etc.". Also, "working groups have been carried out for the analysis of the projects that we considered to be a priority and suitable for presentation or implementation." Likewise,

In several projects, feedback has been collected from participants to set the direction and pace of the groups, as well as their rules of operation, at the beginning of certain training actions that do not depend on a formal programme or that can be developed with different strategies.

In any case, the aim is to try to measure the long-term impact of the project, and for this purpose it also resorts to "working on standardised evaluation models by areas of work, but leaving room to measure unique project indicators".

### **3.3. Participatory evaluation in the response to emergency situations**

#### *Differences in conducting these evaluations compared to those involving ordinary programmes*

71.4% (N = 10) of the sample did not report any differences in the participatory evaluations regarding the response to emergency situations compared to ordinary programmes. The remaining 28.6% (N = 4) justified their answer by signalling the difference in the application of operating criteria between the two types of intervention, as reflected in the following testimony: «Other criteria are prioritised in an emergency (efficacy, efficiency, and accessibility) over and above sustainability or the transfer of capabilities.»(Participant U)

#### *Adjustment of the methods for evaluating humanitarian projects*

The participants were asked whether the participatory evaluation method suited the reality of the humanitarian projects undertaken; 63.6% (N = 9) said they did while 36.4% (N = 5) said they did not. One of the main reasons given was the importance of adapting to the evaluation parameters for the humanitarian intervention in hazardous contexts:

Humanitarian aid is provided quickly and it is often the case that no further work is done in the area. It is very hard to measure the long-term impact because people still need long-term humanitarian aid under the same conditions, which means you continue to provide them with humanitarian or emergency aid several months or even years later, depending on whether they are refugees, or by contrast in the event of natural disasters when people generally resettle in other areas. The evaluation therefore enables you to measure, for example, the number of people cared for, the number of new people in the project, the number of people with a basic food supply, the number of people vaccinated, the number of people with access to medication, the number of treatments provided with basic medication, the number of treatments for each kind of chronic illness, frequent diseases amongst the target population, and the budget per person for medical care, health, and food. The figure will always be the same, but if you extend the time the care is provided for these people you only measure the same thing. There is no improvement in quality of life as they remain in the camp with no chance of improvement. Another differentiating aspect and which can indeed be evaluated is when there is a transition from emergency to development,

which means you can then measure other aspects regarding an improvement in quality of life. (Participant 13, Item 11)

*Types of participatory techniques, methods, and tools used when evaluating programmes involving humanitarian aid/the resettling of refugees*

The participants were asked about the type of participatory techniques, methods, and tools used when programmes involving humanitarian aid/the resettling of refugees. The following presents the respondents' answers:

**Table 3.** Types of participatory techniques, methods and tools used when evaluating programmes involving humanitarian aid/the resettling of refugees.

Types of participatory techniques, methods, and tools	N	%
Rural participatory evaluation	3	21.4
Investigation-action	4	28.6
Mainstream community treks	0	0
Focus group discussions	9	64.3
Analysis of the daily use of time	3	21.4
Score, classification for initiating dialogue	2	14.3
Analysis of the main change	2	14.3
Mapping results	7	50
Others	6	42.9

*Testimonies on the different methods of participatory evaluation*

The participants were asked whether the methods of participatory evaluation provide different results to non-participatory ones. Twelve participants answered, of whom 83.3% (N = 10) said they did, while only 16.7% (N = 2) said they did not.

Among the participatory methods they have used and which they have found useful, "All those that allow a change in the observer's point of view: focus groups, experience diaries, etc." stand out. For example, "action research, as well as group discussions and debates are more in line with the type of social intervention in which we work in the organisation", or "focus groups because they allow relevant qualitative assessments that shed light on the quantitative results and on the processes to achieve them, as well as on the difficulties experienced subjectively".

However, it appears that "the beneficiary survey is a straightforward method in this area". Although "participatory rural appraisal, focus group discussions, and change analyses also offer significant results." However, reflection and shared dialogue with the affected population are "feedback mechanisms and joint assessments with other actors through coordination mechanisms."

Furthermore, the use of participatory evaluation offers added value in "shared knowledge, insights based on own experiences that sharpen interventions with the collective." It brings diversity of perspectives by "complementing the institutional vision with first-person experience, ownership of the results achieved, etc." It also "adds an essential element of active listening to the participants and gives them a leading role in assessing the results, improving or correcting the projects". All of this offers the

possibility of gathering ideas from different actors about the reality at the moment when a project evaluation is being carried out. Some of these ideas "are not initially contemplated and give support to the programmes" and allow the perspective, needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of different people, groups and organisations to be taken into account in order to use resources more efficiently and maximise the impact of the intervention.

**3.4. Participatory evaluation and online digital tools for social work and intervention in emergency situations**

Out of the 13 participants that answered this question, 84.6% (N = 11) affirmed that their agencies had sometimes used digital tools in social work in emergency situations, compared to 15.4% (N=2) that claimed they had not. Out of the 11 participants that said they did use digital tools, we identified different moments and usages, as shown in Table 4

**Table 4.** Use of digital tools for social work in emergency situations.

For the intervention	<p>«Because of the pandemic we have suffered, tools of this nature have become essential arms for intervening, and without them there would have been a collapse in social interventions».</p> <p>«In all the projects, above all for workshops and meetings with the target populations. For direct contact and receiving their message in person.»</p> <p>«Zoom connections and similar with beneficiaries.»</p>
For communicating between staff and agencies	<p>«Because of the pandemic we have suffered, tools of this nature have become essential arms for intervening, and without them there would have been a collapse in social interventions».</p> <p>«In all the projects, above all for workshops and meetings with the target populations. For direct contact and receiving their message in person.»</p> <p>«Zoom connections and similar with beneficiaries.»</p>
For training	<p>«Plataforma e-learning».</p> <p>«Durante la crisis del Covid-19, para replantar la estrategia y metodología formativa de un proyecto de inversión y producción en el medio rural andino.»</p> <p>«Para charlas de formación de equipos, encuestas, comunicación colaborativa inmediata, puesta en común de actividades y solución de problemática.»«e-learning platform».</p> <p>«During the Covid-19 crisis for reformulating strategy and the training methodology for an investment and production project in the Andean countryside.»</p> <p>«For team briefing talks, surveys, immediate peer communication, for sharing activities and troubleshooting.»</p>
For assessment	<p>«Monitoring and evaluations due to the COVID-19 restrictions and lock-down.»</p>

On the other hand, the participants responded on the assessment of the use of conventional digital tools for participatory evaluation carried out by NGOs. In this respect, the entities scored this item from 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all and 5 being totally. None of the organisations gave a score of 5. The rest rated the degree of use as follows: not at all (2; 15.4%), a little (1; 7.7%), quite a lot (4; 30.8%), a lot (5; 46.2%). The results show that the majority of the organisations use these digital tools between quite a lot and a lot.

Among the most commonly used tools are: Whatsapp (N=9, 33%), Zoom (N=8, 31.3%), Skype (N=2, 5.4%); WeChat (N=2.7%); LINE (N=1, 2.7%), Facebook Messenger (N=1, 2.7%); Teams (N=1, 2.7%); Adobe connect (1, 2.7%), Drive (forms) (N=1; 2.7%); Google form (N=1, 2.7%), Meet (Google) (N=1, 2.7%), among others. These results show that the most used tools were Whatsapp for mobile and desktop messaging; Zoom for online meetings and video calls, Skype for video calls.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This article's main aim has been to analyse data on the methods of participatory evaluation used by sundry institutions/agents involved in a project in emergency situations. At the same time, the aim was 1) to evaluate the participatory evaluation actions undertaken by the different agencies participating in the study; 2) to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of the evaluations the agencies have conducted; 3) detect those participatory evaluation measures the agencies have adopted in response to emergency situations, and 4) investigate the digital tools agencies use to conduct online evaluations.

Recent decades have witnessed a significant increase in the importance given to processes of social and community participation, and in the discourse of both international organisations and national governments, given their potential contribution to social development and the consolidation of democratic systems (Cardozo, 2008), with community participation being directly related to collective decision-making and the community's own empowerment. These aspects are the hallmarks of participatory evaluation. This methodology constitutes a change in perspective in the way of evaluating programmes (Soler et al., 2014). The results obtained are consistent with that tendency, as they reveal that this method has been adopted by most of the agencies surveyed. Among the lessons learnt, and as the strong points of participatory evaluation, the testimonies highlight the possibility of gathering the different perceptions of the people involved, thereby improving our understanding of the context, adjusting expectations, and potentially enhancing the evaluation. What's more, and as posited by Suárez-Balcazar and Harper (2004), participatory evaluation stands as a process of individual and collective learning that benefits both users and the social workers themselves.

The participants affirmed that use is always made of procedural participatory evaluations, with the establishment a priori of evaluations at different moments of the intervention to ensure the final evaluation has the greatest possible impact. Each moment in the project and its evaluation involves a series of meetings with stakeholders that generally tend to focus on the before and after of the action. This means, as scholars such as Haefner and Gutiérrez (2019) contend, that if any issues or shortcomings are found, there is enough time to realign the intervention and

ultimately achieve the planned outcomes and targets. This calls for such techniques as participant observation during the identification stage or focus groups for the design of campaigns (as part of the undertakings), and steering committees for activities, among others.

This analysis has shown that participatory evaluation is a method that is highly beneficial to interventions in crisis situations. Nevertheless, it is not without its drawbacks, many of which are linked to the interventions' idiosyncrasies in humanitarian aid settings. Many of the difficulties and challenges facing the implementation of participatory evaluation in adverse settings require adapting the method and techniques to the cultural diversity of each context and to its idiosyncrasies.

These drawbacks and difficulties involve the chaos prevailing in humanitarian emergencies, the lack of reference data, a high staff turnover, a humanitarian crisis in remote areas and damaged infrastructure, the pressure of time on the victims and the fact that people may have little time to take part in an evaluation or are frightened to do so. These difficulties may be largely mitigated by ICTs, as revealed by the vast majority of participants that affirmed that their agencies had sometimes used digital tools in interventions involving emergency situations, which they value positively.

These tools provide the possibility of communicating despite the distance or physical isolation thanks to videoconferencing apps such as Zoom or Meet; the flexibility and facility of reducing costs in terms of resources and distribution times, and the minimisation of the social desirability of the respondents' answers, as there is no direct, face-to-face intervention, enabled by such tools as Google Form; and the possibility of jointly drafting documents using collaboration software resources such as Google Drive, are some of the examples presented in this study.

The use and development of technology in the Knowledge Society may favour social interventions and participatory evaluations in certain projects and situations with the aim of making people's lives easier. This renders it important for the development of e-social work to continue advancing as another indicator in the pursuit of wellbeing and the advancement of cities, as well as in areas with few resources. We cannot conclude without flagging the importance of acquiring digital skills and the know-how that social workers need to have as hands-on professionals (García-Castilla et al., 2017), which will help them in their interventions with social agencies and in situations of emergency.

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