Search *for* Common Ground

The Peace Impact Framework

An Overview and Application Guide

August 2026

Introductory Note

The Peace Impact Framework represents an 8-year effort to address the barriers to making research and evaluation on peace more accessible. In August of 2018, members of Search for Common Ground sought to unpack not only the issues they were facing building evidence, but the wider problems that blocked many top practitioners, funders and researchers from accessing the same spaces and conversations. In its first iteration, that solution was called the Global Impact Framework. It was a first attempt to offer a solution that could bring evidence together for a wide variety of audiences, and change the dynamics in who sets the agenda for peace. It included 6 themes and 20 indicators and still underdeveloped options for integration of rich data from communities. It quickly evolved through consultation and testing into the Peace Impact Framework (PIF): with only five themes and ten indicators, and solidified approaches in the Grounded Accountability Model and Outcome Logs that supported further piloting and uptake of the framework.

However, the framework was always designed to evolve. In its first testing phase, the team stated a commitment to test, iterate, and, at the end of 2025, update the framework itself based on its feedback and use. Since then, practitioners and researchers have learned to adapt the PIF to their work, and done so across more than 30 countries. Their experiences helped us identify what methods are most valuable, which measures are most useful, and what features will continue to expand the contributions of knowledge in this field.

In this second iteration of the PIF, themes and indicators have been further simplified, the data and tools have been more deeply integrated, and new resources are available. We have also created a guide for adaptation that supports the uptake of tools and resources. This effort continues to evolve, and barriers to make peace more accessible remain; but our progress to-date is necessary and will continue in the years to come.

TO CITE THIS GUIDE

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Why Do We Need the Peace Impact Framework?

Current standards in peace research and evaluations point to two competing versions of rigor: reliable and consistent, or deep and practical. Frameworks that have the largest reach in policy have data that can be replicated, most often quantitative, and are designed to help people to make comparisons and decisions. When evaluating interventions, impact evaluations and randomized control trials are considered the highest level standard. However, these approaches make compromises. They may take a year or more to provide updated findings, may rely on secondary data that is updated even less often, or may reduce variables and scope in order to ensure quality study of a narrow set of variables. This limits how these can be used for real-time decision-making in contexts with many factors at play.[1]

Other research and evaluations take a different (more qualitative) approach to understanding peace: letting people most affected by issues lead in identifying research priorities and on telling us the outcomes. These methods are used widely for the way they reshape power in research, and are known for providing uniquely accurate information, not based on previously held assumptions, but based out of the emerging dynamics and experiences of people themselves. They produce highly rigorous research that can create deep learning in a given context, but lack the generalizable results of other approaches. In evaluation, outcome mapping and harvesting, Most Significant Change, developmental evaluation, and many other methods are considered more accessible for deep learning, but they are less often used in investment and policy decision-making because they are difficult to quantify and compare to other contexts.

The majority of people and organizations intervening in conflicts cannot follow the highest standards in either category. Without a framework that joins these bodies of knowledge and creates opportunities to contribute evidence at different scales and scopes, we continue to miss the vast majority of knowledge about what changes conflict dynamics simply because it is not being published, cited, or counted. By providing a common language for peace and conflict, the PIF can close the gap. Everyone can map their data onto a cumulative body of evidence at different scales and approaches tailored to suit their context and capacity, allowing us all to identify patterns across research and evaluations. When organizations align their measurement to the same core themes, they can better share what matters for resilient societies and promote the right decisions for peace collectively.

1. Philip Rojc, “In a World Beset by Conflict, Could Better Ways to Measure Peace Change the Funding Equation?” *Inside Philanthropy*, March 9, 2023, https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2023-3-9-in-a-world-beset-by-conflict-could-better-ways-to-measure-peace-change-the-funding-equation.

What Is the Peace Impact Framework?

The Peace Impact Framework (PIF) is a shared model for measuring peacebuilding impact. It was developed by Adrienne Lemon and is stewarded by Search for Common Ground, built through interviews and consultation sessions with academics, practitioners and funders from over 180 organizations between July 2019 and May 2020 and refined through pilots with Search's country teams and local partner organizations across Afghanistan, Colombia, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, South Sudan, Tunisia, Uganda, and Yemen between January 2020 and July 2021.[2] It replaces siloed evidence with one structure that any organization can use the same way across every program it runs: three population tiers, four Vital Signs, and three measurement approaches used together.

The PIF treats measurement as a language to describe what it is happening, describe what we should be trying to change, and to build evidence on when and how change occurs.[3,4]

A Single Ecosystem Tracking Three Tiers of Impact

Evidence can be mapped into three connected tiers, representing a single ecosystem where early momentum builds outward to create a wider ripple effect:

Tier	Definition
Core group	The core people served directly by a program or with specific attributes within a population. In evaluation, they are directly engaged and may receive resources or services directly. In research they represent specific sub-groups, and may have specific types of influence on a conflict.
Secondary group	Broader community segments. In evaluation, they may be engaged through outreach, information sharing, or public events, but are not directly involved in initiatives themselves. In research, they represent community groups but not an entire population.
Systemic environment	The broader population. In evaluation, this may be the population in the place a program operates, who may not be directly exposed to the programming, but whose daily realities are altered as the wider environment stabilizes around them. In research, this would be a broader population affected by a conflict dynamic.

This tiered logic is consistent with a broader body of research on how concentrated engagement with a committed core can produce change that ripples outward through a wider population. Studies of civil resistance movements, for instance, have found that campaigns that actively engage a relatively small share of the population have historically succeeded in driving major social and political change.[5] The PIF's three-tier model reflects that same underlying logic: changing dynamics are best understood by tracking impact of participants alongside the broader community and systemic environment they influence.

2. Adrienne Lemon, “A Global Framework to Measure Peace,” in *Are We Making a Difference? Global and Local Efforts to Assess Peacebuilding Effectiveness*, ed. Stacey L. Connaughton and Jasmine R. Linabary (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), 259–72.

3. Adrienne Lemon and Mélanie Pinet, “Measuring Unintended Effects in Peacebuilding: What the Field of International Cooperation Can Learn from Innovative Approaches Shaped by Complex Contexts,” *Evaluation and Program Planning* 68 (2018): 253–61, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2017.09.007.

4. “Peace Impact Framework with Adrienne Lemon, SFCG,” video, CoPeSe Network – Peacebuilding, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u73zrODdTCc.

5. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

What It Tracks: Four Vital Signs of a Healthy Society

The PIF measures shifts across four Vital Signs of societal health. Similar to vital signs of physical health, the signs provide a common starting point for tracking a society's health.

Vital Sign	What It Captures
Safety / Violence	Personal security: the incidence and trend of violence, safety risks, and trauma, and whether people experience safety and live free from apprehension in their everyday routines.
Agency / Powerlessness	An individual's perceived ability to affect change and their connection to their society. Powerlessness — including systemic marginalization — often drives people toward adversarial or violent methods to reclaim a sense of purpose and influence.
Trust / Polarization	Social cohesion, or horizontal trust: the level of mutual confidence among individuals concerning common rules, opportunities, and social contracts. As trust deteriorates, polarization intensifies and groups begin to see each other as threats.
Legitimacy / Disengagement	Institutional legitimacy, or vertical trust: how well institutions preserve the trust of the people they are meant to serve, based on the perceived fairness and responsiveness of governing systems.

Three Approaches

Progress is captured using three integrated approaches together to create contextually rich, consistent and quantifiable datasets. The framework acts like a scaffolding that brings the analysis together, but tools and resources exist that blend these approaches for practitioners' and researchers' use.

- **Lived Experience** — people living in conflict know what safety, security, peace, and stability mean to them. Locally driven, qualitative accounts let communities define concepts in their own words and bring accountability to the work.
- **Aligned Measures** — a small set of shared, standardized indicators aligned to the UN Sustainable Development Goal 16 indicators. They are tracked consistently, so results can be aggregated and compared, and shared as a collective contribution to the global commitment to peace.
- **Practitioners' Observations** — the people working and living in conflict every day observe incremental, unexpected shifts that rarely show up in standard indicators. Their expertise adds a lens that surveys and interviews alone can miss.

> **Why all three together**
> Any single method has blind spots. Surveys miss what people can't put into a fixed answer, interviews aren't comparable at scale, and observation alone can't always be independently verified. Together, the three approaches check and reinforce each other, and allow decision-makers to integrate and digest complex data more easily.

How It All Connects

Research or evaluations can take place at any tier: a core group, the broader community, or the systemic environment. By identifying scale it makes it more feasible to clearly contribute to a collective conversation. The approaches (lived experience, aligned measures and expert observations) are integrated into tools and resources that can be adapted. That data is then tagged across the four Vital Signs, combined into one shared picture of change:



Data is captured at each of the three population tiers through the chosen research approach, then tagged into one or more of the four Vital Signs — producing a shared, comparable evidence base that individual programs and the field as a whole can build on.

How It Serves People

The PIF is built around a simple premise: communities affected by conflict are best placed to define what safety, dignity, and progress mean in their own lives, and evidence about impact should be built with them, not just about them. By grounding evaluation in lived experience alongside aligned measures and practitioner insight, the framework keeps organizations accountable to the people they serve, and donors and investors focused on what matters most. Data from the PIF has already been used by youth leaders to help shape priorities of governments,[6] and with communities to help them share their priorities to local decision-makers. The framework has also been applied directly in public policy commentary, to assess societal risk factors and track a community's health against its Vital Signs.[7]

6. Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, in collaboration with the European External Action Service and the EU Youth, Peace and Security Coalition, *Report of the Second EU Youth, Peace and Security Conference* (Brussels, 10–14 November 2025), https://alf.website/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Report-of-the-Second-Youth-Peace-and-Security-Conference.pdf.

7. Beth Fukumoto, “Hawaii Isn’t Insulated From The Threat Of Political Violence,” *Honolulu Civil Beat*, October 12, 2023, https://www.civilbeat.org/2023/10/beth-fukumoto-hawaii-isnt-insulated-from-the-threat-of-political-violence/.

Used consistently over time, the PIF also produces something larger than any one program: a shared, comparable evidence base across organizations and contexts. Aggregated, portfolio-wide data transforms local qualitative and quantitative insight into a macro-level picture of what is and isn't working — evidence that can shift funding and policy conversations,[8,9] and help the field advocate for durable investment in the conditions that protect human dignity. This mirrors findings from research on social change more broadly: work on social tipping points has found that once a committed group reaches a critical mass — in experimental settings, roughly a quarter of a population — it can shift the wider group's norms and behavior, and that even smaller committed minorities can move broader social consensus over time.[10,11] Aligned, cumulative evidence across programs is what allows peacebuilding organizations to reach that kind of critical mass in policy and funding conversations, rather than each program's evidence remaining too small and scattered to move the wider system.

The PIF was developed from decades of peacebuilding practice, and continues to steward it as a shared resource. Organizations, funders, and researchers around the world already use the framework in their own programs, and its guides, tools and resources live on the ConnexUs platform, where a global community of practitioners shares data and reduces the duplication of effort. Beyond Search, the framework's vital signs have informed youth, peace, and security programming at the European Union and African Union levels,[12,13] and have been cited as a model for indicator development in multilateral reporting on youth-focused peacebuilding investment.[14] Adapted models built on the PIF's vital-signs approach, including a Common Impact Framework, are now emerging in continental and national youth-peacebuilding conversations.[13]

8. Shamil Idriss and Rachel Kleinfeld, “No One Is Right in the Debate for and Against Philanthropic Pluralism,” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, June 15, 2023, https://www.philanthropy.com/opinion/no-one-is-right-in-the-debate-for-and-against-philanthropic-pluralism/.

9. Heidi Burgess, “Rachel Kleinfeld and Shamil Idriss on Polarization, Philanthropic Plurality, Social Justice, and Democracy,” *Beyond Intractability*, no. 127, June 26, 2023, https://www.beyondintractability.org/newsletter-127.

10. Damon Centola, Joshua Becker, Devon Brackbill, and Andrea Baronchelli, “Experimental Evidence for Tipping Points in Social Convention,” *Science* 360, no. 6393 (2018): 1116–19, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aas8827.

11. J. Xie, S. Sreenivasan, G. Korniss, W. Zhang, C. Lim, and B. K. Szymanski, “Social Consensus through the Influence of Committed Minorities,” *Physical Review E* 84, no. 1 (2011): 011130, https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevE.84.011130.

12. Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation, in collaboration with the European External Action Service and the EU Youth, Peace and Security Coalition, *Report of the Second EU Youth, Peace and Security Conference* (Brussels, 10–14 November 2025), https://alf.website/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Report-of-the-Second-Youth-Peace-and-Security-Conference.pdf.

13. Lena Slachmuijlder, “Deliberative Technologies in Youth, Peace & Security,” Toda Peace Institute, *TRANSCEND Media Service*, July 20, 2026, https://www.transcend.org/tms/2026/07/deliberative-technologies-in-youth-peace-security/.

14. Benjamin Claeson, Mohamed Ghanem, and Catherine Howell, *Investing and Partnering with Youth for Peace (IPYP): Inception Report 2023* (Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2023), https://www.daghammarskjold.se/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/dhf-report-ipyp-2023.pdf.

About This Guide

This guide walks any organization through applying the Peace Impact Framework (PIF) — a shared model for measuring peacebuilding impact — in its own programs. It sets out what to do at each step, where you have flexibility to adapt to your own context and resources, and what decisions your team needs to make along the way.

References to a “program lead” or “M&E lead” describe typical roles in a peacebuilding organization — adapt them to whatever structure fits yours. What matters is that someone owns each step and that the six steps are followed in combination, not as a checklist to complete in isolation.

This guide follows two tracks depending on your goal. Follow the **Research track** if you're characterizing the state of peace and conflict in a place — a region, a country, a border area, an online community — independent of any specific program's participants: for example, to establish a baseline, monitor a trend, or compare conditions across places. Follow the **Evaluation track** if you're assessing whether a specific program, policy, or intervention is contributing to those shifts; it builds on the Research track, adding a way to define who your work reaches. Steps 1 and 4 present both tracks side by side so you can follow the column that fits; Steps 2, 3, 5, and 6 apply the same way to either track.

A note on specificity

This guide focuses on the method: how to define your population, choose what to track, and gather evidence in a way that is credible and comparable. It does not prescribe specific targets, indicators values, or case examples, since those depend on your organization's own strategy, scale, and context.

Step 1 — Choosing A Target

Before selecting metrics or deploying tools, define the population or context your measurement will focus on. The path depends on what you're trying to do — evaluate a specific program's contribution, or characterize a place or population on its own terms.

EVALUATION TRACK — PROGRAM-SPECIFIC

Map your program's population footprint into three interconnected, fluid tiers. Categorizing your targets ensures your data collection matches your investment scale and captures the full ripple effect of your work.

Tier	How to Define It
Core Group	Your direct programmatic footprint. Who is receiving intensive training, managing local initiatives, leading platforms, or receiving direct resources? These are your primary nodes of change.
Secondary Group	Indirect participants engaged through outreach, public events, or information sharing. Who interacts with the spaces, platforms, or tools mobilized by your core group, without managing them directly?
Systemic Environment	The broader general public or geographic ecosystem. Who has no direct awareness of your project, but will benefit as the environment around them becomes more safe, stable, or responsive?

RESEARCH TRACK — CONTEXT-WIDE

Define the place, population, or context you are studying. This becomes your frame of reference.

Scope	How to Define It
Core Group of Interest	A small group of people who may be interconnected and involved in a conflict in some way.
Sub-groups of interest	Demographic, identity, or location-based groups within that scope whose experience you want visible in the data, rather than reporting only an aggregate.
Geographic or thematic scope	The region, border area, sector, or online space you're characterizing — the boundary that defines what counts as “in scope” for your data.
Comparison point (optional)	A prior time period, a neighboring context, or a national baseline to measure against, if your goal includes tracking change or making a comparison.

Decide up front, in plain terms you can use consistently, who belongs in each tier of your scope. This becomes the reference point for the measurement decisions that follow.

Step 2 — Setting Sampling and Frequency

Sampling means selecting part of a population that is representative of the whole, so you can make reliable generalizations without reaching everyone. In fragile or conflict-affected contexts, your sampling strategy determines whether your data truly represents the community or population you're studying, or just reflects the loudest voices — it is a safety and representation challenge, not only a statistical one. How often you sample matters just as much as who you sample: too frequent, and you risk survey fatigue and diminishing returns; too infrequent, and you miss the moment a trend actually shifts.

Before you deploy any tool

Verify two commitments: intentional diversity (have you mapped the specific sub-groups (by location, identity, or vulnerability) so less visible forms of marginalization are represented?) and shared everyday experience (does the sampled group share a common set of realities that reflect the community or population you set out to serve or understand?).

Tier	Sampling Approach	Frequency
Core Group	Sample deliberately and directly. You may choose to sample as many people in this group as possible to get a clear picture of their experiences, and how their networks evolve.	Every 3–4 months, and every 6 months to a year for network shifts.
Secondary Group	Sample a statistically distinct subset to capture broad engagement trends, and supplement with qualitative discussions for specific sub-groups when resources allow.	Every 4–6 months, aligned with the core group's cadence so results stay comparable across tiers.
Systemic Environment	Sample specific spaces, events, or population segments, depending on the scope of research or evaluation plans. Do not sample people you don't need to, so consider what types of evidence you want to build. This population will help you catch macro-level shifts.	Every 4–6 months, aligned with the core group's cadence so results stay comparable across tiers.

Smaller, more tightly monitored samples are not a compromise. A small group tracked closely and often, with robust monitoring, can produce evidence rigorous enough to demonstrate impact or make important contributions to our understanding of peace, even when a full population sample isn't feasible.

Step 3 — Adapting Tools

These are the field instruments behind the three approaches used throughout this guide: Surveys operationalize Aligned Measures, Qualitative Discussion Guides operationalize Lived Experience, and Observational Tools operationalize Practitioners' Observations. Format covers how any of these are actually administered in the field.

Surveys

Surveys using the Peace Impact Framework are built from a uniform, actionable set of indicators to compare results across different programs and track context shifts over time. They use 7 indicators:

Vital Sign	Indicator
Safety	% of the population that feels safe walking alone around the area they live.
Agency	% of the population that believes they can make a positive difference in the area they live.
Agency	% of the population that takes action to influence the things they care about.
Trust	% of people who believe they are perceived as less than human in their society because of their group membership.
Trust	% of population that is willing to use violence to advance their group interests.
Legitimacy	% of the population who believe decision making is inclusive and responsive.
Legitimacy	% of the population that are satisfied with services they seek from authorities.

If we commit to systematically tracking these, we can tell a collective story about peace, and bring our results together to create understanding.

To add data developed from communities' lived experience or practitioners' observations, you can adapt a survey in two ways. First, add additional indicators to build the survey that come out of information you have from observations or communities defining peace. Categorize them across the Vital Signs and integrate them as contextually relevant indicators. Second, you can add open-ended questions in a survey to gather observations and insights from an entire sample, and use them to inform observations and community definitions or experiences of peace.

Whatever indicators you use, pass every survey through a Focus Test and four editing filters before it goes to the field:

- Define your focus first — every question must map to a metric or decision. If you can't explain how you'll analyze and act on an answer, delete the question.
- No double-barreled questions — never ask two things at once.
- Keep language simple, specific, and neutral — avoid vague timeframes, leading phrasing, or loaded framing.
- Design a smart flow — start with easy, comfortable questions, and place demographic or sensitive questions at the very end.

Indicator	Sample Question	Answer Options
% who feel safe walking alone in their area	How safe do you feel walking alone around the area you live in?	Very safe / Moderately safe / Moderately unsafe / Very unsafe
% who believe they can make a positive difference	I feel that when I get involved in my community, I can change the way it is run.	Strongly agree / Moderately agree / Disagree / Strongly disagree
% who believe decision-making is inclusive	Do you believe local institutions make decisions that consider your perspective and respond to your needs?	Yes, very much / Yes, mostly / Somewhat / No / Unsure

A note on tools

There is a developed set of survey tools that serve as a base template, including close-ended and open-ended questions to capture aligned measures and lived experience, and offer ways to add other contextually relevant questions for the indicators you want to include. These tools are available in over 70 languages, along with example questions that other teams have added for different countries. Visit ConnexUs (cnxus.org) for more information on these tools.

Qualitative Discussion Guides

You cannot rely on academic definitions or rigid questionnaires to capture lived experience. Focus groups and interviews are designed to let communities define core concepts and identify real-world changes in their daily lives. Check every prompt against three rules before fieldwork begins:

- **Avoid abstraction:** use active, sensory verbs (to see, to hear, to feel, to do). Instead of “What is the level of institutional governance here?” ask “What do you see or hear around you that proves local leaders are working for the community?”
- **Avoid jargon:** never use the exact keyword you're measuring inside the question itself. Ask what a “real voice” in a decision looks like, rather than asking directly about “inclusion” or “agency.”

- **Move from broad to specific:** map the wide, unprompted everyday realities of the population before introducing probing questions. This builds comfort and prevents participants from guessing the "right" answer.

While there are many approaches that can be used for this, one approach created in line with the PIF that prioritizes a community-defined approach to lived experience is called the Grounded Accountability Model, or GAM.[15] GAM is a research approach that engages community members to define concepts as they see them, rather than importing definitions from outside.

> **A note on tools**
>
> The PIF has sample guides for discussion that may be adapted to different contexts. These, in addition to the survey tools, are preset into different platforms so that a user can make use of secure platforms that may help overcome challenges with safety and security or logistical challenges of recording open-ended data.

Observational Tools

Practitioners working and living in a conflict context observe and analyze their surroundings every day, just by doing their work. Many shifts are incremental and unexpected, and don't make it into standard indicators. The PIF draws on rich approaches that already do this well, like Outcome Harvesting and Mapping, Most Significant Change, and Developmental Evaluation. These approaches can be used with anyone who has deep connection to a conflict and can observe important changes or shift over time.

Observations rely on a few important points to be useful:

- The people involved should be the ones who can and have been observing change, so some scoping needs to be done in advance to be sure you are working with a group that can offer these insights.
- Both positive and negative outcomes, and positive and negative context shifts, should be recorded for the most rich picture, and to ensure you capture shifts or outcomes that might have been unintended.
- Observations should be verifiable: actions, behaviors, things people said or did that you can ensure have happened.

> **A note on tools**
>
> The Peace Impact Framework currently has sample tools developed that make it easy to tag context shifts and outcomes, their significance, and the contribution of actors to the change. These exist in a log format or as a digital voice questionnaire, that people can share to support a discussion. Resources are available upon request at cnxus.org.

Format

How a tool is administered can matter as much as what it asks. Match the format to your context, population, the sensitivity of the topic, and the resources you have available:

15. Eliza Urwin, Aisalkyn Botoeva, Rosario Arias, Oscar Vargas, and Pamina Firchow, "Flipping the Power Dynamics in Measurement and Evaluation: International Aid and the Potential for a Grounded Accountability Model," *Negotiation Journal* 39, no. 4 (2023): 401–26, https://doi.org/10.1111/nejo.12448.

- **In-person:** builds trust and allows for follow-up probing, but requires more time and can be harder to keep confidential in small or tight-knit settings.
- **Telephone:** fast and lower-cost, and can be more secure for data collection, but excludes people without reliable phone access or a private space to speak candidly, and can flatten nuance on sensitive topics.
- **Interactive apps or tablets:** efficient and often offline-capable, and can support audio prompts for lower-literacy respondents, and can provide opportunities for interaction after research like sharing results or follow-up, but require devices, charge, and a degree of digital comfort.
- **Online or web surveys:** efficient at scale, but skew toward populations with reliable internet access and self-select the more digitally connected, which can quietly shift who you're actually hearing from.
- **Voice-recorded messages or interactive voice response:** preserves tone and nuance in discussion guides and observation logs, and works well in lower-literacy contexts, but requires informed consent for recording and secure storage, has the same access barriers as telephone surveys, and may not be as trusted in some settings.

Whichever formats you choose, keep them consistent within a sampling cycle so results stay comparable, and record the format alongside the data itself — a shift in format between rounds can look like a shift in the underlying trend.

Step 4 — Planning to Build Evidence

Once your Vital Signs are being tracked consistently, decide how you'll build evidence over time. The path depends on whether you're evaluating a program's contribution or tracking a place or population on its own terms.

EVALUATION TRACK — PROGRAM-SPECIFIC

Design a practical, relevant, and resource-efficient evaluation system by understanding the milestone journey of your targets, then matching each milestone to the right assessment tool. Move past flat participation headcounts — attendance alone doesn't tell you whether an intervention had a relevant or positive impact. A simple 3Rs framework helps track how target groups move from simple exposure to active, quality behavioral change.

Tier	Reach / Resonance / Response
Core Group	**Reach:** Are you reaching who you intended, and is anyone missing? **Resonance:** Are participants actually using the skills or tools? Does the design fit their reality? **Response:** What is the quality of the actions or solutions they're leading?
Secondary Group	**Reach:** Are your platforms, events, or channels attracting diverse participants? **Resonance:** Is your message sticking — are people engaging constructively, or ignoring it? **Response:** How does engagement intensity compare to the core group?
Systemic Environment	**Reach:** What is the total public or geographic footprint where you're active? **Resonance:** Does the design align with and address community needs, as the public perceives it? **Response:** What macro-level structural change can you verify across the area?

Match your tools to your audience rather than assigning one tool to one tier: use practitioner observation for your own internal adaptation and learning; combine lived experience, survey, and observation for your core group; and lean on survey plus observation for your secondary group and the systemic environment.

RESEARCH TRACK — CONTEXT-WIDE

Without a program's milestone journey to track, build evidence on a fixed cadence instead — establishing where things stand, then confirming whether that picture is actually changing.

Stage	Purpose & Cadence
Baseline	Establish a starting reading across the 4 Vital Signs before tracking any change — the point every later comparison is measured against.
Interval check-ins	Repeat the same tools on a fixed cadence (for example, quarterly or annually) using identical questions and sampling logic each round, so results stay comparable and shifts are caught early.
Trend confirmation	Treat a single interval move as a signal, not a conclusion — confirm a real trend only once it holds across two or more consecutive check-ins.

This cadence applies whether you're establishing a baseline for the first time or checking an existing one — the discipline is running the same tools, on the same population, at consistent intervals, so change is measurable rather than anecdotal.

Step 5 — Coding the Vital Signs

No matter which tool you use, tag every survey result, interview quote, and observation log to one of the four Vital Signs before it is reported. The tools are the how; the Vital Signs are the what — the mandatory health checks of your program.

Vital Sign	What It Captures
Safety / Violence	Personal security — incidence and trend of violence, safety risks, and trauma.
Agency / Powerlessness	People's perceived ability to affect change and their connection to their society.
Trust / Polarization	Mutual confidence among individuals concerning common rules and social contracts.
Legitimacy / Disengagement	How well institutions preserve the trust of the people they're meant to serve.

Edit every field tool — survey, interview guide, or observation log — so each question or prompt maps cleanly to one of the four Vital Signs before data collection begins. This prevents fragmented or siloed datasets down the line.

Step 6 — Communicating on Peace

Data collection is only as useful as your ability to translate it into actionable intelligence. Route both quantitative metrics (surveys, statistics) and qualitative narratives (focus groups, observation logs) through a shared categorization process to produce four distinct, evidence-based outputs.

Output	Core Question	Evidence Used
What is changing	The trend and pace of progress across the 4 Vital Signs over time — moving toward stability, or reverting to risk?	Survey data paired with verbatim community quotes.
Where is it changing	The precise locations and social cohorts where change is taking root — or, if you're evaluating a program, where your interventions specifically are taking root.	Demographic filters and spatial or geographic tracking data.
Why it changes	The exact triggers, actions, or sequence of events behind the shift — proving the causal link (to your program, if applicable), not just the correlation.	Practitioner logs combined with lived-experience rationales.
What does change cost	The cost of peace or conflict, put in measurable monetary value.	Secondary data on costs and investments, mapped against changes (positive or negative).

Tag every finding entering your reporting workflow with these four dimensions before it goes into a report, dataset, or decision — an executive report, a donor dashboard, a public dataset, a policy brief, or a program adaptation decision.

Standards Checklist

A consolidated view of the commitments in this guide. Ask these questions before treating an M&E plan, tool, or dataset as final.

- [ ] Is your target population mapped into three tiers — Core Group, Secondary Group, and Systemic Environment?
- [ ] Is progress tracked through Reach, Resonance, and Response for each tier, not just headcounts?
- [ ] Are Lived Experience, Aligned Measures, and Practitioners' Observations used in combination, not in isolation?
- [ ] Is every survey result, interview quote, and observation log tagged to one of the 4 Vital Signs?
- [ ] Does every interview or focus group guide avoid abstraction and jargon, and move from broad to specific?
- [ ] Has every survey passed a Focus Test and clear editing filters, with sensitive questions placed last?
- [ ] Has sampling been checked against diversity and shared-experience commitments?
- [ ] Does the sampling method match the tool and the safety/representation needs of the context?
- [ ] Is every finding entering a report tagged with What / Where / Why / Cost?