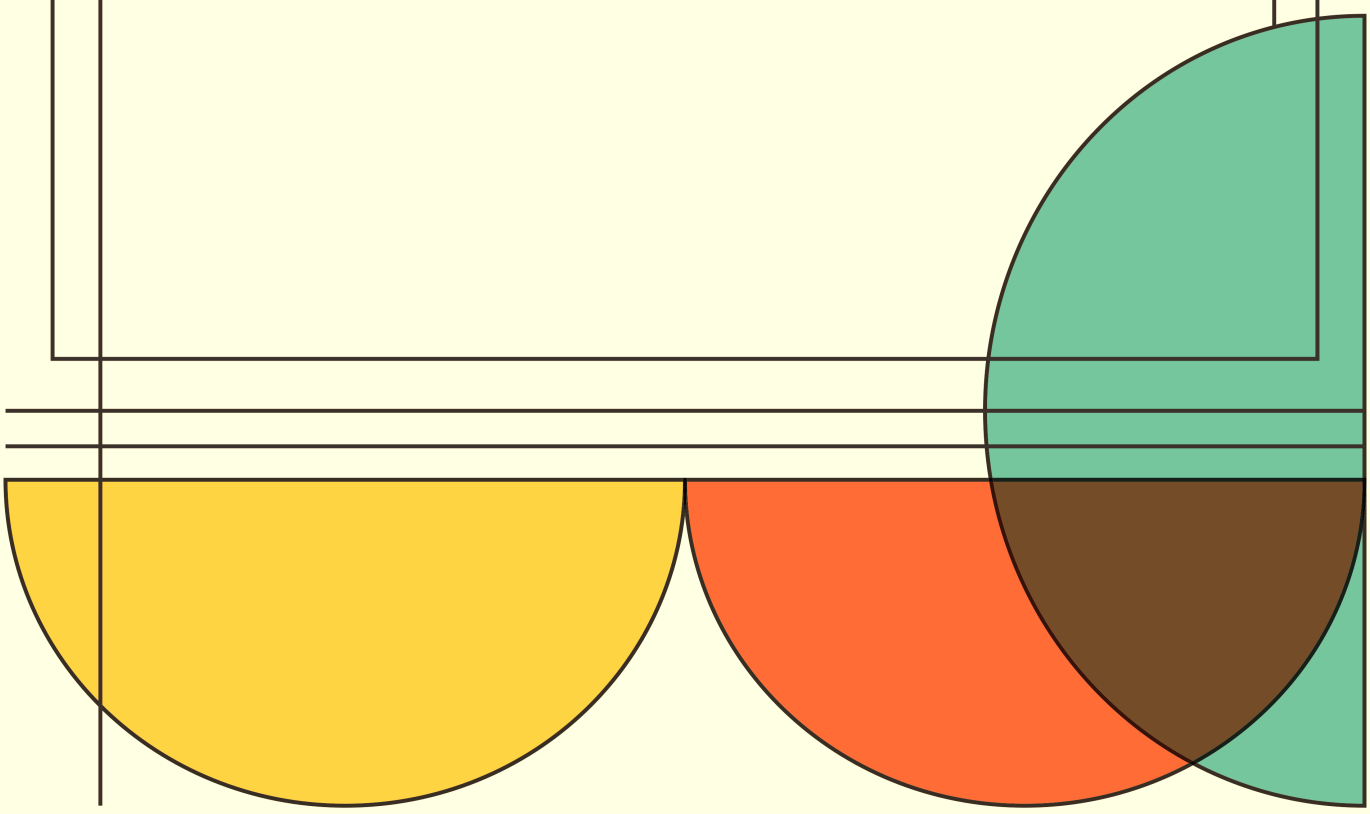
Are you co-creating?

A CRITICAL COMPANION TO MORE INCLUSIVE COLLABORATION



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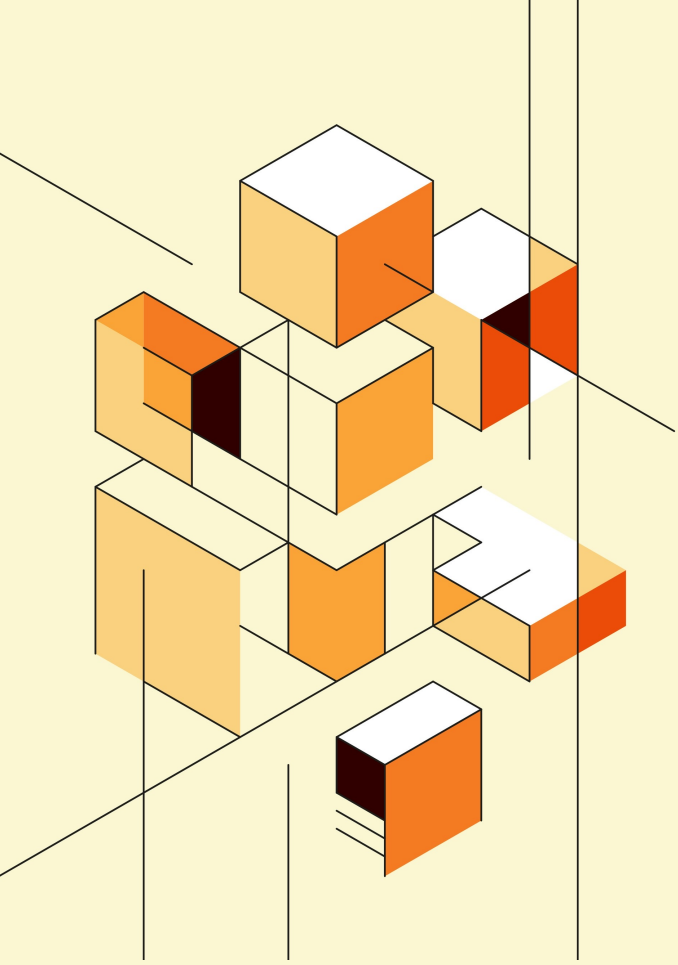


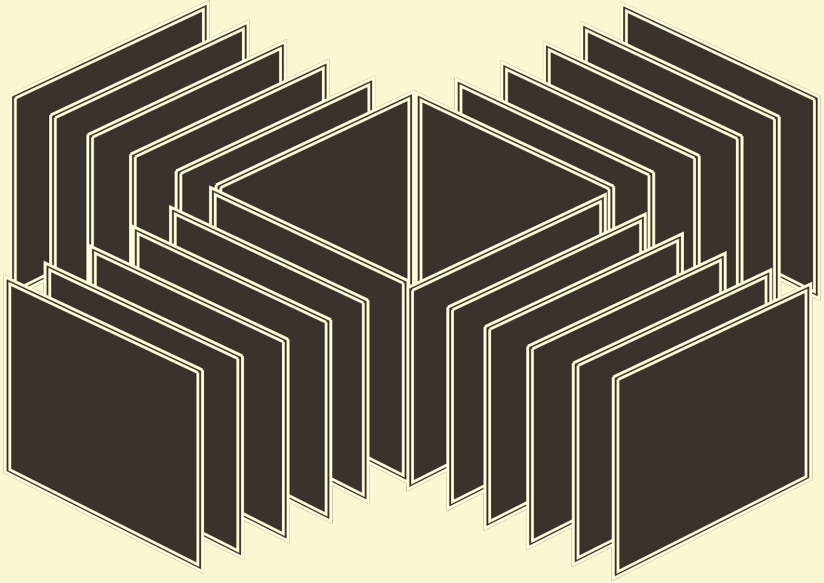
Co-creation toolkits promise inclusive innovation – bringing communities, designers, and organizations together to solve complex problems. But what happens when “bringing everyone into the same room” isn't enough?

This companion document **challenges the hidden assumptions in popular co-creation methods.**

Unlike traditional toolkits that provide step-by-step instructions, it acts as a critical lens, helping facilitators recognize power dynamics, cultural differences, and knowledge hierarchies that standard approaches often ignore.

Exploring assumptions: Most toolkits assume visual thinking is universal, that icebreakers work everywhere, and that voting equals meaningful participation. In practice, these assumptions can exclude the very communities we're trying to serve.

Our companion principles: critical reflexivity, reciprocal relationships, and knowledge equity can transform co-creation from extractive consultation into genuine collaboration. Through real stories from Nepal to Rwanda, this guide shines a light on what can happen when facilitators truly share power, compensate expertise, and let communities lead decision-making from problem definition to implementation. Essential reading for anyone who's ever wondered if their “participatory” project is actually participatory.



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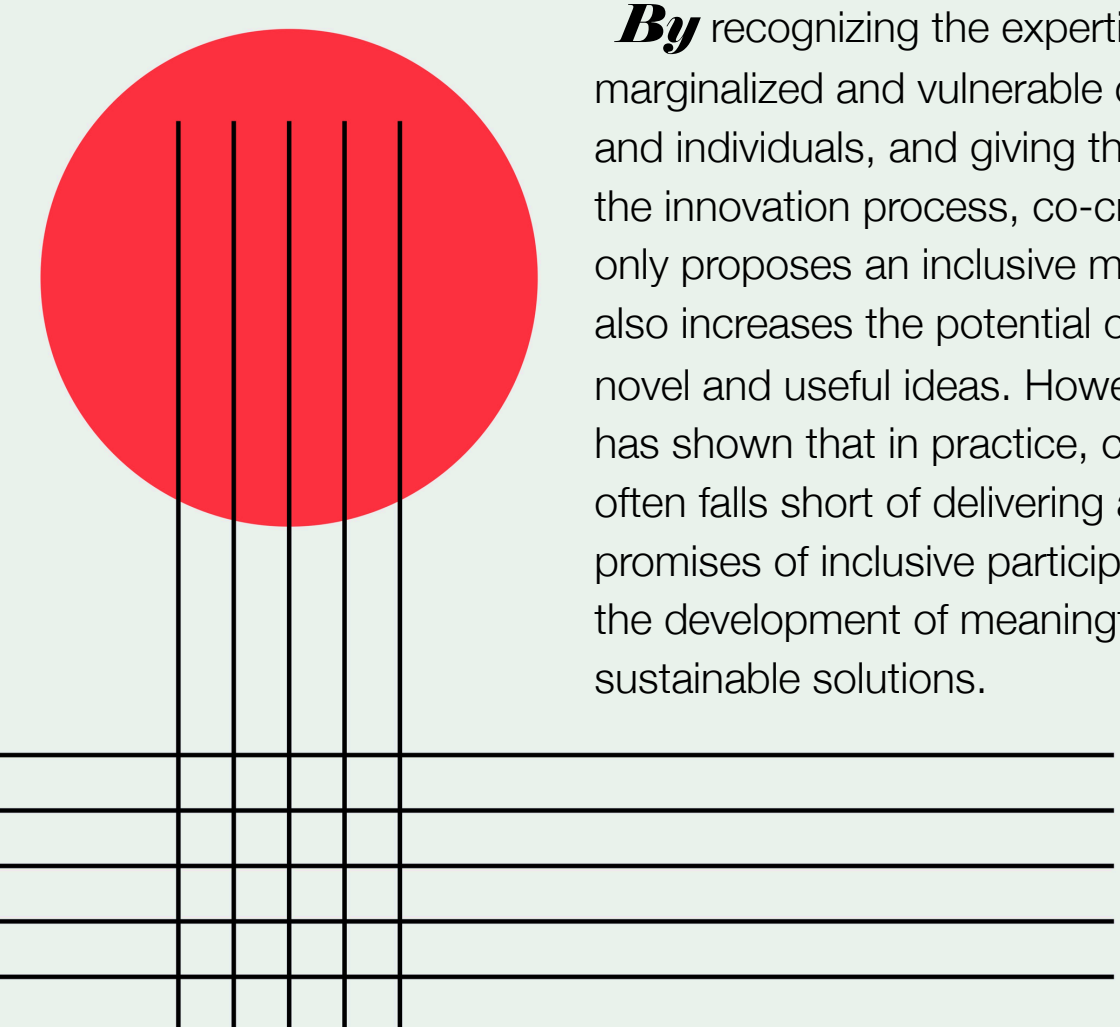
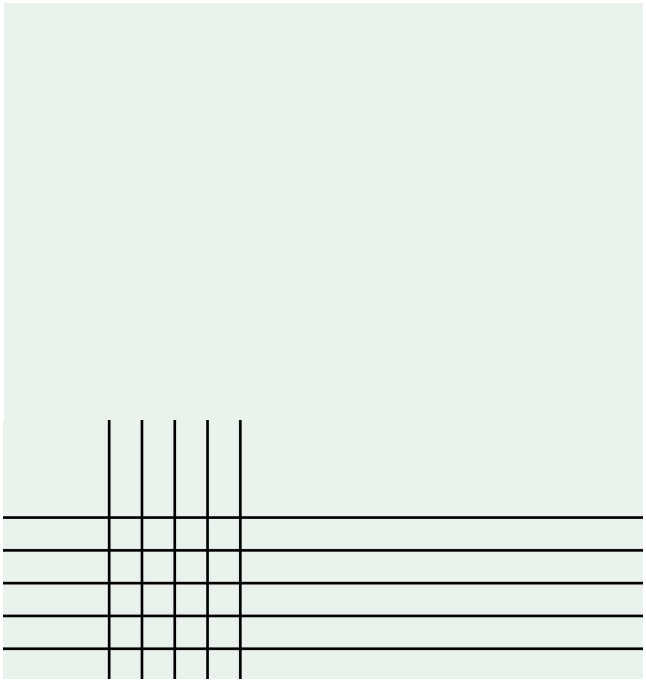
As we are facing increasingly complex societal issues – from climate change to poverty, migration and aging – collaboration has become the "new competition". Co-creation, a collaborative innovation method that invites all stakeholders, and in particular individuals and communities facing the issues we are trying to tackle, has gained traction among non-for-profit organizations, international agencies and governments.

If the names for co-creation may vary – from human-centered, user-centered, community-centered to participatory design, co-design or open innovation[1], at the core it is always about moving from designing for to designing with.

As such it is increasingly seen as a go-to-solution by various actors that include co-creation in their projects with the hope they can develop solutions that can generate both immediate and long-term change.

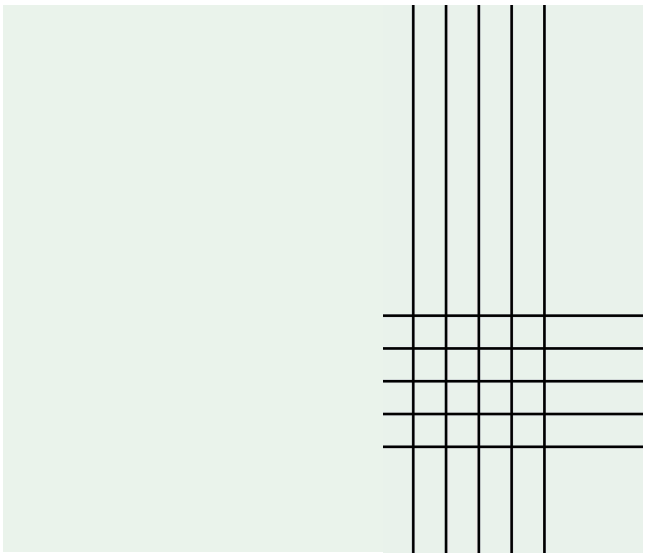


By recognizing the expertise of marginalized and vulnerable communities and individuals, and giving them a voice in the innovation process, co-creation not only proposes an inclusive model, but it also increases the potential of generating novel and useful ideas. However, research has shown that in practice, co-creation often falls short of delivering all its promises of inclusive participation and the development of meaningful and sustainable solutions.

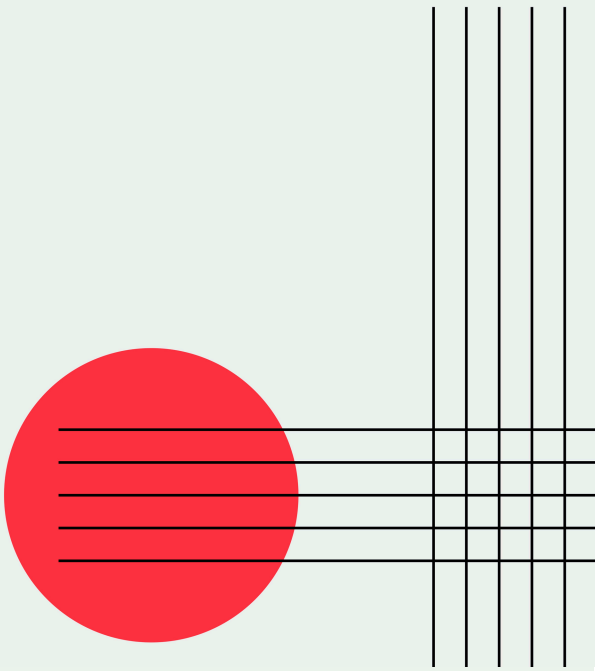


In the last few years, with the increased interest in co-creation, a lot of facilitation tools — innovation and design toolkits — were developed. As we reviewed them, we noticed that except for the Human-Centered Design Toolkit recently published by Aga Khan Foundation[2], power dynamics were rarely mentioned. **While these toolkits provide useful tips and great methods and tools to work with communities and end-users, they often seem to assume that it is enough to bring everyone in the same room for the magic of collaboration to happen.**

At the same time, there is a tradition in design theory of critical reflection[3] which emphasizes the need for designers to think about their role and position. It invites designers to move away from a role of leaders or creators to take on a facilitator role in the innovation process. Critical design theory, along with indigenous studies, decolonial scholarship, conversations with designers, case studies, and some of our own work, informed this analysis. They frame our reflection on the challenges faced by facilitators (individuals and organizations) when trying to fully embrace a co-creation approach and what might be missing from existing toolkits.



This companion aims to better equip individuals and organizations as co-creation facilitators. It does so not by providing you with another set of tools (there are many for you to use), but by unpacking assumptions put forth by co-creation toolkits. It helps you ask questions about your practice, and contextualize some of the generic activities and tools provided by toolkits and be mindful about employing them in your projects. Because sometimes it is not easy to see how things might look in practice, **this companion includes specific stories that illustrate inclusive co-creation practices and some tips, activities and questions to help you make intentional choices, contextualize tools and methods that truly engage community members in the social innovation process.**



Why do we need to be more thoughtful about co-creation?

While co-creation, praised for its inclusivity and its potential to generate long-term social impact, has gained traction among non-for-profit organizations, international agencies and governments, it is often narrowly understood. Typically, co-creation projects tend to invite community members to simply share their experience at one point of the project instead of engaging them in the whole process (from problem framing to ideation and implementation) as experts of their contexts[4]. This lack of full engagement not only jeopardizes co-creation's promises of more meaningful and sustainable solutions, but it also potentially excludes community members and replicates existing power distributions[5] [6]. This limited engagement reflects power asymmetries that are often ignored. Power asymmetries are socio-political or economic, gendered or cultural; and they are also deeply connected to knowledge: who is considered as having knowledge and expertise, and who gets to define problems, shape solutions, and make decisions.

For co-creation to be practiced inclusively, we need to take these power dynamics seriously and try to rebalance them by challenging the boundaries between who knows and who makes decisions at different points in the process, depending on the situation. For instance, you might be an expert in facilitation and this is crucial in the co-creation process, but you do not necessarily understand the cultural nuances of interactions and local organizers or community members might have more expertise. Similarly, while outside consultants might have a more systemic view, they do not understand all the complexity on the ground and therefore might not be the best person to define the scope of the problem to solve.

To create more equitable co-creation processes, it is important to move beyond viewing community members as beneficiaries and rather recognize them as co-producers of knowledge – identifying problems as well as actively shaping solutions.

However, it is difficult to move away from entrenched power dynamics that are most of the time invisible to all stakeholders. Epistemic power dynamics are particularly difficult to become aware of, as it requires us to completely reconsider our ways of thinking. Indeed, when referring to knowledge, we refer to the dominant Global North paradigm: scientific knowledge, defined as objective and universal, is the yardstick of knowledge[7]. According to this paradigm, there is only one "real" form of knowledge and one reality to which we all belong. Other forms of knowledge or realities, when acknowledged, are at best exotic or intriguing. Therefore, we must understand that engaging with communities is about accessing a different knowledge system and recognizing that they may inhabit a different reality altogether. This means expanding our single-sided perspective to recognize other realities as being as valid as ours. If not, we risk to ignore, and therefore unintentionally reproduce, inherited structural power asymmetries.
Taking stock of the need to address this epistemic bias, this companion invites you to become aware of your position, unpack your assumptions, and provide you with some principles to see the world as a pluriverse[8] composed of multiple realities and knowledge systems.

How to use the companion?

We chose to call this document a companion rather than a toolkit, because it seems to us that by definition it was beyond any toolkit's scope to critically address the power dynamics among the different actors involved in the process. While a toolkit aims to provide you with a set of tools presented in an easy-to-use fashion, a companion's stance is more reflective, supportive yet inquisitive**. Think of this companion as a lens that helps you be aware of your position at various stages of the process. It will help you be aware of potential biases and make sure that you create the right conditions for co-creation to happen.** You don't need to use it throughout the process, but can rather, pick it up when you need to reflect on whether you are co-creating or not.

It is structured in two main sections:

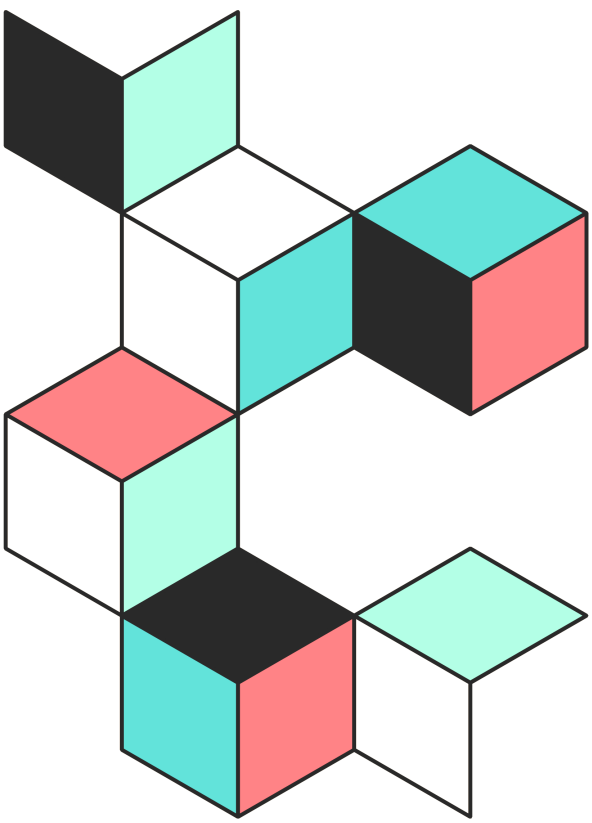
1. Grounding Principles
2. Unpacking Assumptions

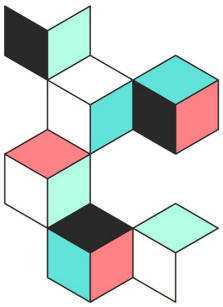
Because principles are easy to state, and agree to, but difficult to put into practice, we provide you with some examples and tips to put in practice these principles. Unpacking assumptions is not easy either. Thus the Companion provides you with some considerations and principles to help you unpack the assumptions underlying co-creation toolkits and enact them in a more inclusive and democratic fashion. And because in the end, it is about what we do and how we do it, we include stories from the field, which share successful (and sometimes not so successful) examples from social innovation and international development projects across the world. They bring forth actors and forces from the field that shape the outcomes of any project, showcasing the agency of the facilitator during the process.

Grounding Principles

Co-creating in an inclusive and truly collaborative fashion is grounded on three key principles:

Critical reflexivity
Reciprocal relation
Knowledge equity





Critical reflexivity

Critical reflexivity invites us to not take things for granted, recognize our positionality, ask difficult questions about motivations and power dynamics, and put things in perspective especially in terms of our role and community members' perspectives. It is an ongoing, continuous, and ever-evolving practice that goes beyond a handful of events or check-ins or a positionality statement[9]. Being critically reflexive also means that we are aware that our work is never neutral. It has an impact, and it is always framed from a certain perspective. It is therefore essential to be politically committed, recognizing our positionality, the consequences of our work and being accountable for it[10].

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

It is not easy to be critically reflexive, and we often can push it back to later because we need to get things done. This is why it is essential to create a space and time to pause and reflect. There are many tools that can help you in this reflective process.

1. Diaries (in written or audio forms) are of great help. Mentors or having a buddy system can also be a great complement as they provide a sounding board and the social element that makes critical reflexivity less lonely.

2. Start by taking the time to pause and reflect. That's what EquityXDesign calls the Equity Pause[11] inviting us to check and pause at each step of the process. Shalini Agrawal, from Public Design for Equity defines the equity pause as "a time to pause the [design/planning] process to reflect and share our learnings, remind ourselves of our shared goals/ practices, and name what we might do better in the support of racial equity and inclusion. She offers a series of questions[12] that we found useful to use as prompts at different stages of the process to reflect individually but also brainstorm as a team:

Awareness: What would we like to say that hasn't been said?

Inclusion: Who are we not hearing from? Why?

Relationships: Is this conversation/action/project moving towards relationship?

Acknowledgments: Are we acknowledging history? What and who would you like to acknowledge and celebrate?

Process and practice: Are we on the right track? Do we need to update our practices and processes?

Goals: Are we moving towards more and/or improved equity and inclusion practices"

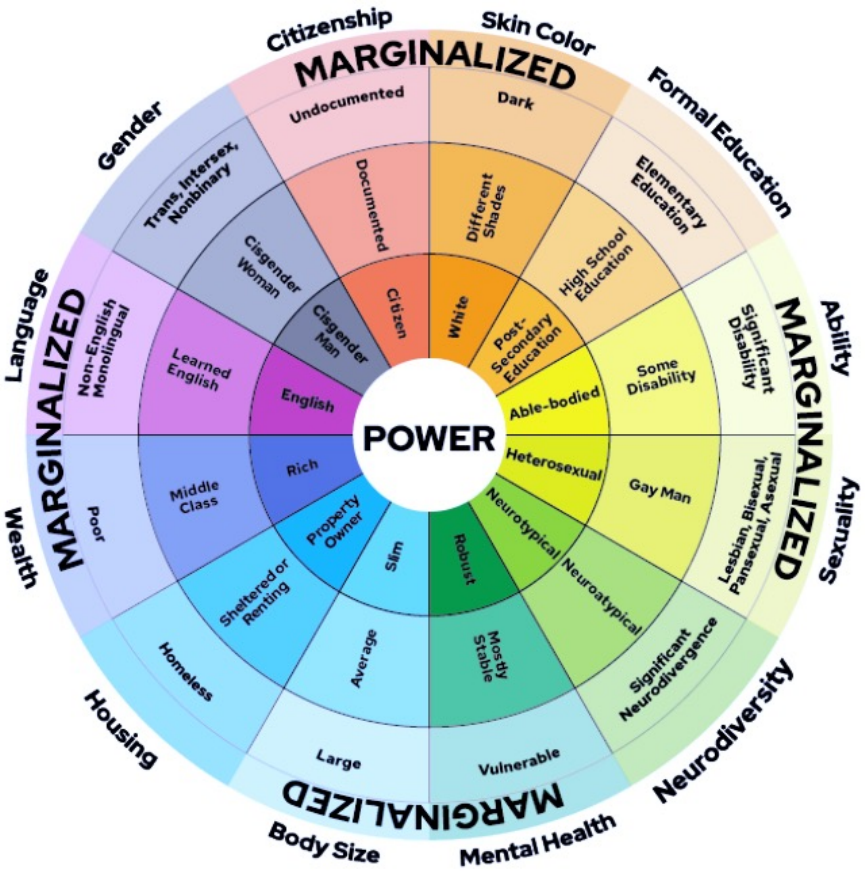
Implicit biases: Where are our blindspots and biases?

Never would I ever: What social issues do I feel I must recuse myself from, that I would risk publicly refusing my work to support?

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

3. Reflect on your positionality. The positionality wheel provides a useful tool for all the facilitators to reflect on their positionality. It is not about guilt but about thoughtful awareness. This will be a good reminder to some of the issues you might want to be particularly careful of. This is something you can do individually or as a team of facilitators.

Sylvia Duckworth's Wheel of Power/Privilege organizes the various identities of a person on a wheel with the identities that hold the most power in our society placed at the center, and the identities that hold the least power in our society on the outskirts. The wheel is sectioned off into 12 categories, each marked by their own unique colour and in order of most powerful to least powerful.



Adapted from James R Vanderwoerd ("Web of Oppression"), and Sylvia Duckworth ("Wheel of Power/Privilege")

It is important to keep in mind that this graphic is not intended to capture all areas of marginalization. The intent is to provide a framework to consider power and privilege. As you identify additional areas of marginalization, take time to reflect on how you might represent that within the model.

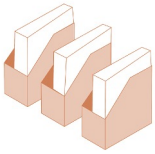
As you look at each of the categories, you can try to position yourself.

What do you notice? Do most aspects of your identity fall in the most powerful areas of the wheel? The least?

Most importantly, how does that impact your interactions with community members with identities different than yours?

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

4. Be wary of dualisms. Even as we try to reflect on our positionality, we can sometimes think in terms of “we” vs. “them”; and them, the community members are perceived as a homogenous group. Yet, they are not and it is important as an outsider to be sensitive to differences that might influence interactions and interpretations during the project. Here reading a little about the culture of a place and its socio-cultural norms can help. You’ll also want to take notes of the power dynamics among community members when you facilitate an activity. See who tends to talk, where do people sit, who talks to whom during the break, who arrives / leaves with whom, etc.



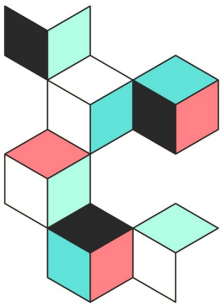
Story from the Field: Leveraging positionality and power for inclusivity

A student organization from an American university partnered with a Nepalese non-for-profit to pilot a women’s empowerment initiative in a slum of Kathmandu. The team of students and their advisor, who had developed the idea, went to Nepal to run a one-week co-creation workshop with women from the slum. The advisor quickly realized that despite her efforts she could not escape her positionality as a white, middle-aged professor. She therefore decided to take advantage of it and leverage her influence by challenging social norms hoping her mistakes would be “excused”. For instance, she ensured that women from marginalized groups could participate fully. She also asked – always with care, and prefacing them with "I am not sure”, “I was wondering” questions about gender inequalities or safety. When possible, she also shared her own experience. Women responded and shared personal stories. Interestingly, the team from the non-for-profit was very surprised by some of the insights that emerged from the workshops, noting that this had never been mentioned before.

During a team debrief session, the students and their advisor reflected on this comment and realized that their position as outsiders allowed them to ask questions that might seem inappropriate. It also allowed women to tell them things they would not share with the non-for-profit team who shared their cultural norms and prejudices. This reflexive approach helped turn differences from potential barriers into an opportunity for dialogue, learning and equitable collaboration.

Story from the Field: Centering lived experiences

Critical reflexivity is important at the individual and at the organization level. It informs the organizing of Think of Us, a US-based child welfare non-profit organisation who work to transform the foster care system. All their work aims to center the lived experience of individuals who go through the foster care system. As such in each project where they engage young people, parents and guardians, they make sure that they have on the team people who shared lived experience with the participants. This is essential to create a baseline level ("you know how this is") and flatten differences between participants and facilitators. The head of research noted that "we form our research teams with an eye not only towards subject matter and lived experience, but also to have some experience in counseling or peer support". A design researcher told us that they helped with coordination, scheduling, compensation, and other logistics like compensation, but never facilitated workshops because they did not share a lived experience with participants. Organizationally, such an approach meant that the organization hired people with lived experience as members of the staff[13].



Reciprocal relation

Inclusive co-creation requires moving away from extractive research methods and doing contextually relevant work. To do so, it is essential to embrace the principle of reciprocity[14]. Reciprocity means first that there is collective ownership over the entire research and / or innovation process. It also requires that everyone involved in the project receives in return something that they value or can bring them value. For instance, we cannot claim that because we are facilitating a project to address issues in their community ("we are helping them"), it is enough to justify community members' participation without any form of compensation. In the end, the principle of reciprocity, aims at producing knowledge equity between different stakeholders.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

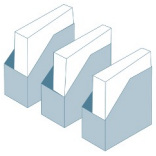
1. Recognizing the value of work by paving for it
Community members will expend some costs (missing out work, time used for taking care of children or households, etc.) when participating in a co-creation project. Therefore, it is important to compensate them for these costs and paying for transportation and a meal is not enough. It is important to provide them a stipend recognizing their work as they work along the facilitating team whose members are paid to work on the project. Even in projects where facilitators might be volunteering, they are still gaining knowledge and some legitimacy and experience that will serve them in the future.

2. Accessing new knowledge opportunities
Community members when participating in co-creation projects interact with highly trained professionals (e.g. researchers, designers, and facilitators) but they rarely learn anything from these professionals. Teaching community members a skill, something as simple as digital photography or making a webpage, can help reduce the extractive nature of fieldwork.

3. Transparent sharing of information:
Community members share their lives and stories with the facilitators but are often not aware of what happens to this information. Make sure that they are informed of how you might use photos or videos you take during the research or workshops. It is important to share with community members the data you collect but also your interpretations. This might be an opportunity for you to get extra inputs and confirm your interpretations.

Story from the Field: Giving back to participants

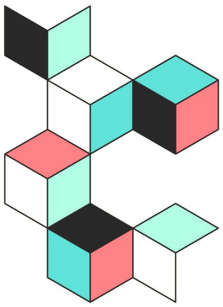
A team of designers from YLabs worked on a family planning and birth spacing project in partnership with Population Services International (PSI) Niger[15]. The research showed that young parents did not understand the literal costs of having children. To help young parents become more aware of the implications of having children, a key dimension of family planning, they designed a prototype that presented to the parents the different costs associated with having one child. The tool then allowed them to multiply the costs by the numbers of children. As they tested the prototypes with the young parents, the team realized that young parents ended up learning fundamental concepts of budgeting as they interacted with the prototypes. The family planning prototype, Dede Ruwa Dede Tsaki, was implemented. Yet, even if it had not been implemented, the team, as one of the designers told us, had thought of how to give back to the participants regardless. In this case, young parents would have still developed a budgeting ability that would be useful to them in the future. Developing reciprocal relations here was about making sure that community members received knowledge through the co-creation process.



Story from the Field: Compensating participants is an ethical concern

Compensating participants is key if we want to be reciprocal, and it is an ethical concern. By not compensating participants, we fail to recognize the value of their time, input and expertise. Victor Udoewa cites a project in the rural U.S. South, where the non-for-profit sponsoring the project, compensated both the professional designers and the community members involved in the project. He contrasts this with a project he did for an international summer service-learning project where high school students were involved in the design and research team. In this project, students were not compensated. Udoeawa pushed back against a possible argument, which is that in this project, he and the other professional designer were also not paid.

Indeed, not paying the professional designers and researchers and not paying the students was equal but it was not equitable. The "failure to compensate team members had a bigger impact on the students than on the professional designers." While it might be difficult to convince sponsors to include compensation in budgets, we should push for it. And if it is not possible, it is important to think of all the many ways we can compensate community members: from travel expenses, meals, opportunities to be the first to test new products and equipment, to training opportunities, certificates of completion, references, recommendations, or referrals to use in job searches[16]. "Ultimately", Udoewa told us "if we have the choice, we should give money because it gives the community members the greatest flexibility to use it as they want. If we compensate community members non-monetarily it should be according to their choice or what they want."



Knowledge equity

To realize the promise of co-creation as a genuinely inclusive process – one in which primary stakeholders are deeply involved from problem framing to ideation and implementation – it is essential to create the conditions for knowledge equity between all actors involved in the co-creation process. Community members are too often brought in **only at the margins**: briefly consulted for input on their lived experience, or asked to endorse pre-designed solutions rather than shape them[17]. **Giving a voice to community members starts by shifting the position of the facilitators or organizers of the co-creation process from the position of expert-who-knows to convenor-who-participates and redistribute control over knowledge production community members.** Facilitators (designers, behavioral scientists, social workers, etc.) then become facilitators and connectors of resources rather than ideators and leaders of the innovation process[18] . Expertise is not understood as something that one owns or does not own, but it is understood as a set of capabilities relevant to a specific situation and that one can enact at a certain point in the process. **Knowledge equity is about recognizing that everyone has valuable knowledge and can take the lead at some point in the co-creation process.**

Creating the conditions for an inclusive process that gives a voice to all, and recognizes the knowledge and expertise of all actors as relevant and with “equivalent value” is not easy – neither for the facilitators who have let go of their position of knowing, nor for the community members who often might not feel knowledgeable and uncomfortable sharing their perspective.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

There are different ways for facilitators to let go of their control and sense of expertise.

1. Ask for help: If you come as an outside consultant, it is important to leverage the knowledge of local organizations as they can help you understand local context and avoid resistance or miscommunication. You can for example ask them to teach you about local practices and norms, or engage them in the planning of some of the activities to start creating a level playing field.

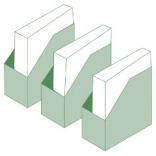
2. Be ready to listen: It is essential to remember when we ask for feedback that it might not be exactly what we wanted to hear. In this case, be open to the feedback rather than explaining why you did what you did (based on your usual process or method).

3. Develop a shared language: Knowledge equity requires to develop a shared language between the different actors. For instance, you might teach your methodological language (design, social innovation, behavioral science) to the community members and local organizations. Because it's always a two-way process, it is also important to find ways for you to be taught by the other stakeholders — local organizations or community members. It's essential methodologically and ethically if you want to do co-creation, but it also makes this process an interesting learning experience.

4. Create slack so that you can iterate: It is important to make sure that you leave space and time for iteration at all stages of the process. Even though you come with a plan, the plan is always open for changes. Remember nothing is fixed in stone. For example, you might also be coming with a first brief, but it might be important to discuss it with local organizations, and most importantly with community members, who are the experts in their own lives and contexts.

Story from the Field: Naming matters

Access Lab, a company that works on the access of the disabled and the deaf to culture and entertainment as a fundamental human right, always works with representatives of the communities they serve, and they call them consultants. They were invited to participate in a co-creation workshop for a project rethinking a public space in a university. The other participants were students, faculty, and staff from the university, as well as some management consultants. Access Lab came with 5 "consultants" – with various disabilities, from visual impairment to limited mobility and neuro-diversity – who went around the campus with different teams to map their experience navigating the campus. Later on, one of the management consultants who participated in the workshop said she was surprised by the use of the term "consultant" by Access Lab. She added that, in the end, "it made so much sense. They were consultants in the sense that they brought expertise and a different point of view. That's what we do as consultants". One of the co-founders of Access Lab, Jwana Godinho, explained that naming was an intentional decision and stressed how essential it was to recognize the expertise of their community members. For her, this was the first step to being inclusive.



Story from the Field: Stepping up

Several groups of students in a university in Europe were working in a co-creation project with migrant women working as consultants to their project. Dilara, a woman from Bangladesh, noticed that one group seemed a bit lost and could not come up with an idea to develop. She went to them to share a problem she faced, and felt a lot of immigrants faced (particularly women): knowing how to turn a skill into a small business. The students listened to Dilara's problem, did some extra research and combined it with insights they had developed during their research. Realizing that there was an opportunity to support immigrants in turning skills or ideas into a small business, they developed a program, New Routes, to support migrants and refugees interested in starting a small business. Dilara gave feedback on the program and participated in the first pilot that they did with a non-for-profit working with migrants and refugees. The first pilot was such a success that the employment team of the non-for-profit decided to include it in their regular programming. Dilara said, "I'm very proud of seeing my suggestion being listened to". One of the students reflected on how her input helped his team in developing a meaningful solution after his team had felt stuck. He added that it was gratifying for him and his team to see the engagement of Dilara, who was veryshy at the beginning, and gained confidence during the project.

Unpacking Assumptions

Unpacking Assumptions

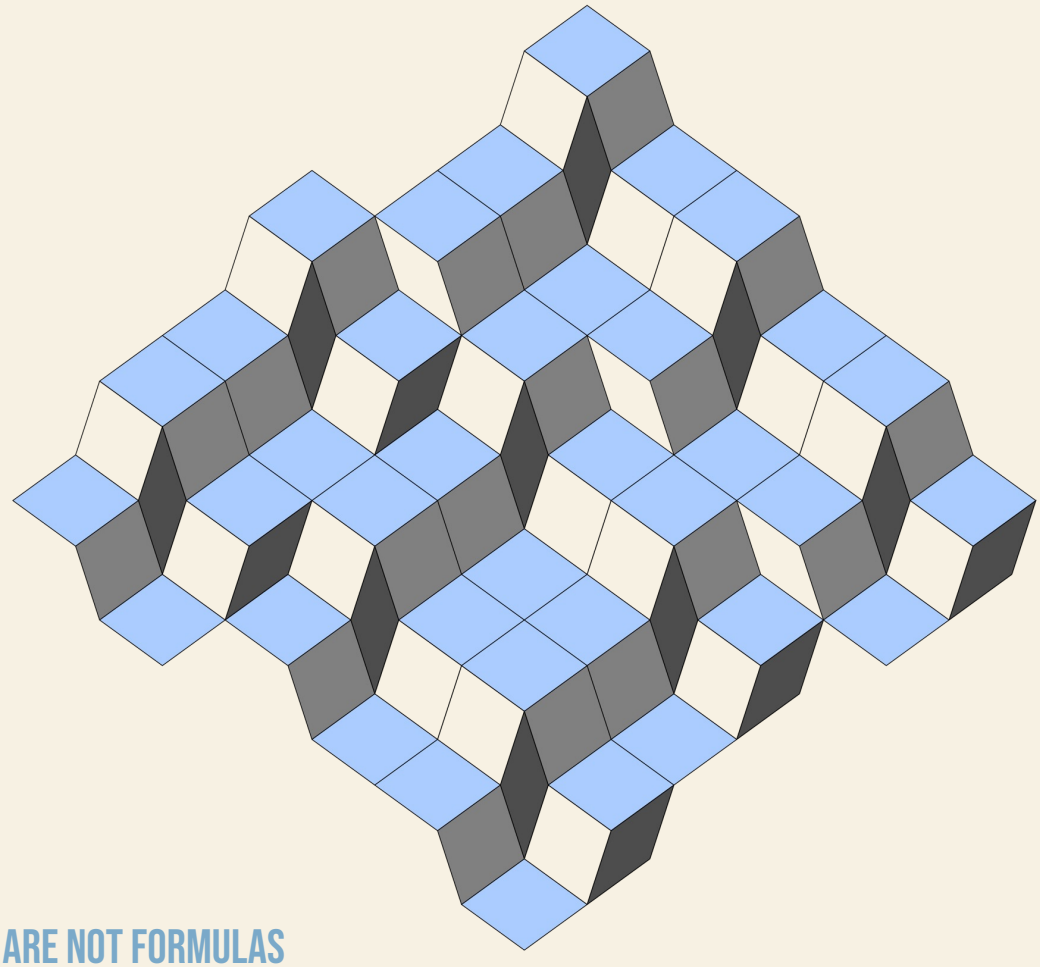
This section aims to provide you with a lens to help you approach your current methods and tools with a critical stance, and help you use existing methods and tools in a more inclusive way.

Our analysis of existing toolkits highlighted three main assumptions. The exercises and activities proposed often seem to be a one-size-fits-all solution that end up overlooking variations in cultures, ways of working, thinking and the likes. They are built upon unspoken assumptions that might prevent you from being truly inclusive. In this section, we invite you to be mindful and scrutinize the place you are intervening in and work with its existing nuances. In some cases, this questioning also invites you to contextualize the methods and activities you are using.

We unpack them through three themes:

1. ICEBREAKERS ARE NOT FORMULAS
2. VISUAL THINKING IS NOT UNIVERSAL
3. VOTING IS NOT DECISION MAKING

Below we discuss how you might take a critical stance while performing co-creation activities. We suggest ways for you to make sense of the context you work in and the tools you plan to use to develop a truly inclusive co-creation process.

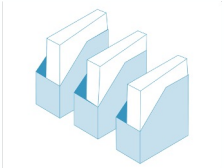


1. ICEBREAKERS ARE NOT FORMULAS

All co-creation toolkits provide activities to trigger interactions between different participants and to ease the collaborative process with participants. These activities can look like, but are not limited to, icebreakers, roleplays, and collaborative games. They are often presented as simple, easy, quick activities that you can just perform at the beginning of a workshop. These activities which are supposed to be playful and fun, can also generate misinterpretations and awkwardness: Throwing a ball in a circle or sketching your partner without looking down at the piece of paper, can create stress and discomfort rather than ease and openness among participants. Each country and culture have their own set of games and understanding of fun. It is therefore important to not take these icebreakers as formulas that can be applied anywhere, at any time. **While these activities are important in creating a sense of ease among participants, it is essential to remember that these are only kickstarters to trigger interactions and conversations. Once the spark is ignited, you then need to build upon them to turn these interactions into relationships and build trust.**

How to create activities that provide safe spaces to build trust and nurture relationships?

- A good starting point would be to interrogate the local organization or the participants on existing games that they have in their culture and that could create an informal and fun atmosphere. You can also ask them if they have heard of the game that you plan to use and understand how it varies in their culture.
- While projects are often under time constraints, it is important to slow down the pace and leave space for relationships to emerge. It's like when you do an interview: you need to listen more than talk, create spaces for your informant to share. Relationship building and trust take time to emerge and need to be nurtured. You need to plan time in your projects for informal interactions and imagine activities that can provide bonding and sharing opportunities.



Story from the Field: Give a memory to connect and start conversations

In a project undertaken with marginalised women in Nepal, one of the facilitators suggested asking the women if they would be interested in having their pictures taken. He assumed that while photos are widely cherished, most of the women would not have photos of their children. The women loved the idea and in fact asked to pose with their children. Most of them admitted that this was the first photo they had of their child.
The facilitating team invited a member of the local youth club who they discovered liked photography to take the pictures with a polaroid camera they had brought. Once all the photos were taken, the team proposed to the women to display them before they took them home. The women happily agreed: they liked the photos so much that they were proud to share them and wanted to see others' photos before taking them home. The women happily went around commenting on each other's photos. They later told the facilitators that they did not know each other and so that it was nice for them to get to learn about their families.

Women looking at each other's photos and commenting; Photo by Leslie Martinez

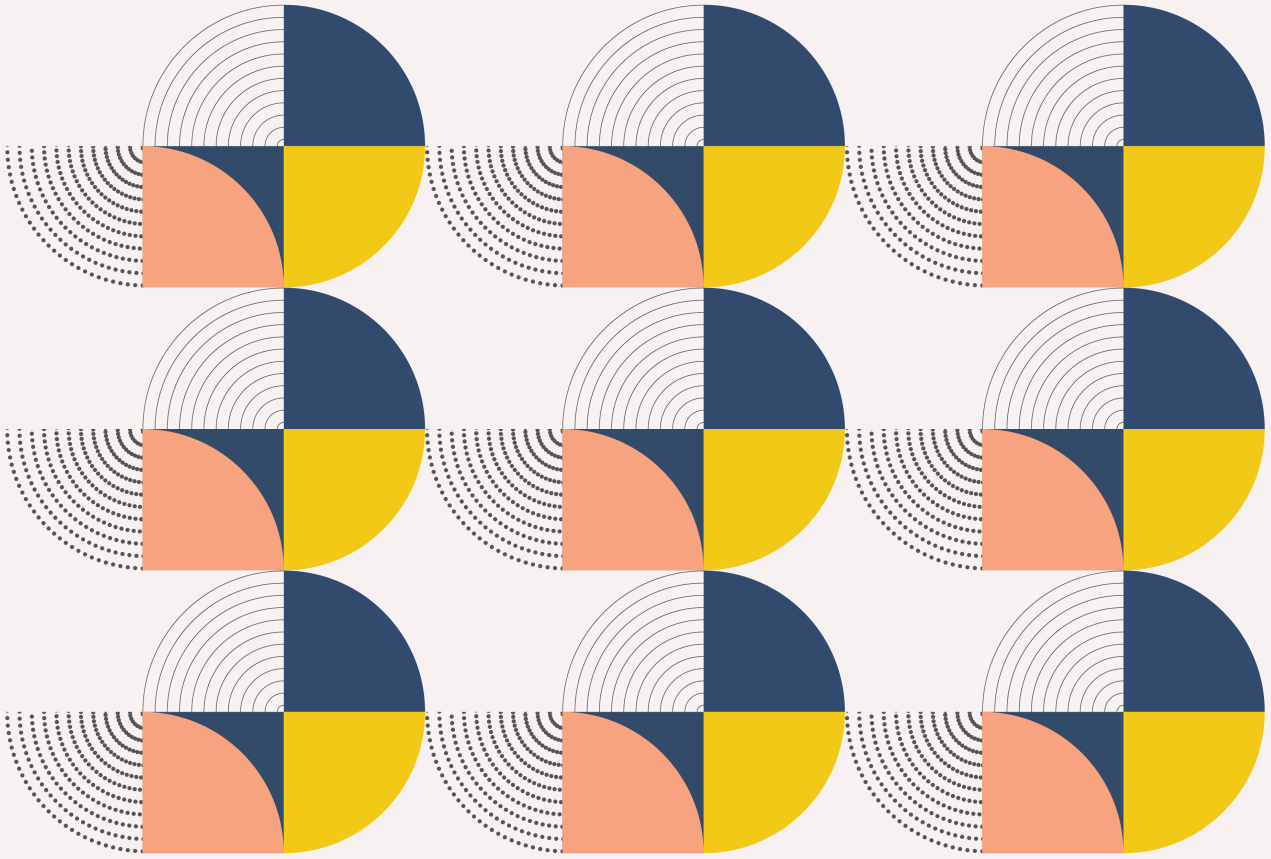
The facilitators had brought a photo of their family that they also displayed, triggering conversations with the women who were all curious to know about their families.
The icebreaker proposed in this case was not a conventional one, and it worked really well as it recognized women's pride to have a picture with their children but also created a community among the women and triggered trust with the facilitating team. A lot of important themes about women's lives and challenges emerged during this activity which lasted nearly an hour. The team was also very careful to always propose rather than impose, in order to make sure that the women felt that they were part of the process.

Story from the Field: Bunny bunny

A youth organization working on sexual and reproductive health in Nepal facilitated a workshop with a group of women from a slum in Kathmandu. They started with a warm-up called Bunny, Bunny. One woman first points at another who needs to do bunny ears and says "bunny bunny" and each woman next to her is also supposed to say bunny bunny, and do the ears. Then the selected woman has to point at someone else. If you don't react fast enough, you are disqualified. The women got really excited and everyone started to laugh.

The international facilitators team who was visiting from the US did not know the game. They asked to be taught the rules and played too. The women seemed very happy about their participation, which was important in building trust with the community members. One made a comment at the end about how nice it was to see the facilitators play with them.

Women playing Bunny Bunny; Personal photo



2. VISUAL THINKING IS NOT UNIVERSAL

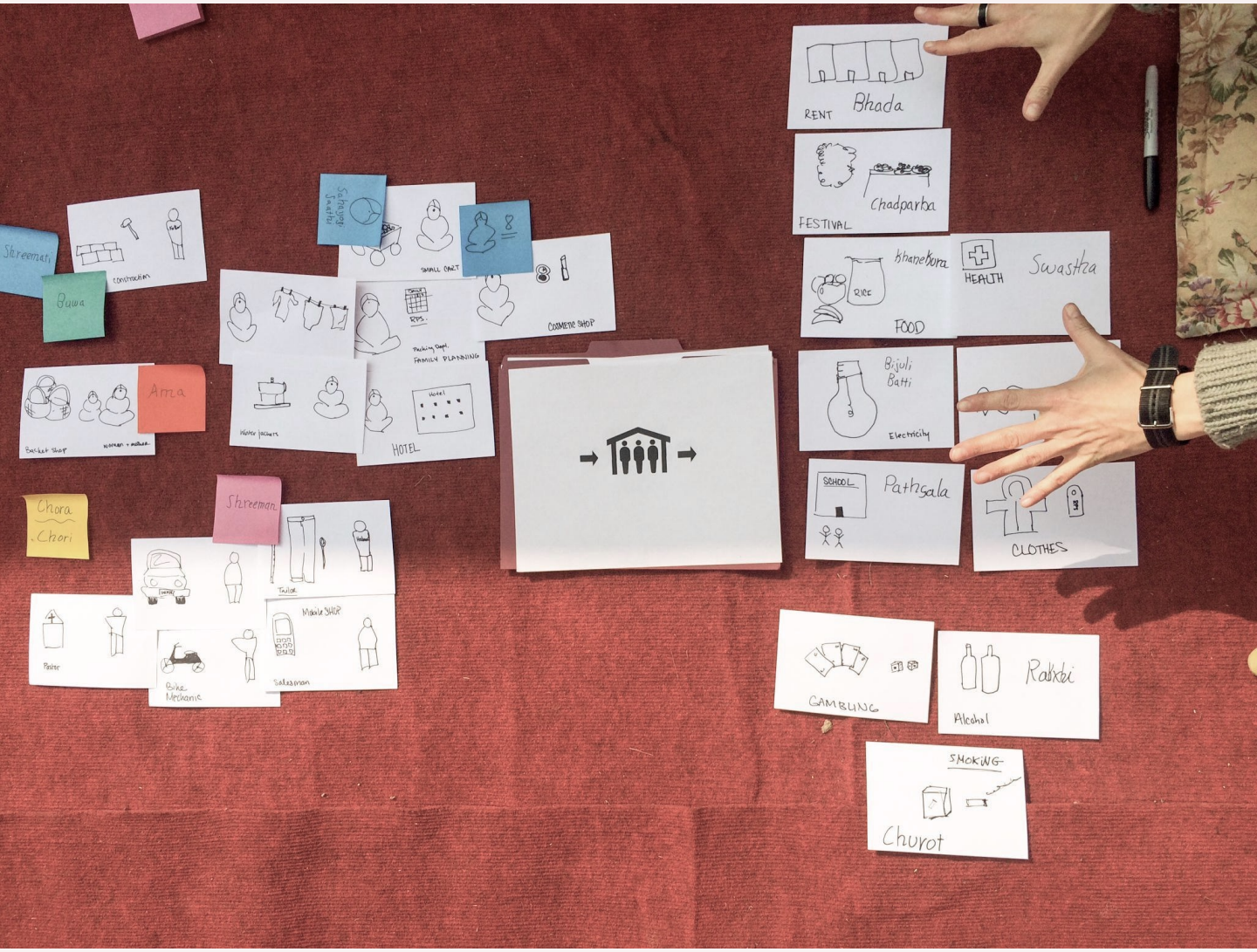
Working with new community members often comes with challenges that call for creative forms of communication. Visual communication methods and artifacts are a popular pick, as they come with an underlying assumption that visual communication is universally understood. Activities involving visual thinking make use of images or drawings to communicate as well as generate ideas. Think of storyboards, card sorting and the likes. Despite a general belief in the universality of visual symbols and their ability to support cross-cultural communication, research has shown that visual symbols, including their shape and colors, have their own meanings for different groups[19].

Depending on the context, sometimes people might or might not be accustomed to the imagery that is "universally" accepted or they might even have aversions to certain visual stimuli. It is therefore important to not presume universal meanings and think about how to contextualize visual symbols to communicate appropriately with them.

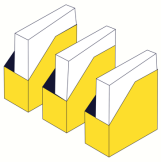
As visual thinking is almost always used in co-creation, facilitators need to acknowledge and work with the cultural nuances of visual artifacts.

How to contextualize visual artifacts so that they become meaningful boundary objects for collaboration?

- You can work with the local organization to get their input and use some cartoons or photos that they recommend. They can also tell you about colors that might have specific meanings in the local culture. In a project, we did with a non-for-profit in South Sudan we developed several card sorting activities to under participants' aspirations, child health, and WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) practices. After looking for icons, we decided to look for photos from the country / region. We shared with the non-for-profit and asked for their feedback to make them appropriate.
- You can ask the participants you are working with to make their own drawings or to select photos. These activities can give you a better idea of how things are represented in the context you are working in.



Activity to discuss source of revenue and use of money in the family. One of the facilitators sketched "live" as participants were talking, confirming their understanding of the images; Photo by Leslie Martinez.



Story from the Field: What you see is not always what they see

Sometimes we tend to go to the simplest forms, thinking we can get to the essence and avoid cultural differences. For instance, a stick figure that seems like the basic way to represent a person in a Western context but in a co-creation project in South Asia, a European designer realized that community members thought it was strange to represent human beings like this. In this same project, the designer was working on getting feedback from the group and was asking them to select the smiley face that they most related with. Most people ended up selecting the 😐 face telling the designers that they did not feel that their facial expression ever looked like 🙂. The designer realized it was not that the community members did not like the ideas, they just did not recognize themselves in the proposed facial expressions. Here, instead of assuming a "universal" meaning behind the symbols, the designer could have initiated a dialogue to communicate the meaning behind the symbols or asked the group to assign meanings for them, or create their own emoticons.

Story from the field: Beware of generative AI

A team working with migrant women developed a visual for a project for migrant families and their children. They created a poster with generative AI to invite migrant families to a workshop they were organizing as a prototype of their project. They asked migrant women they were working with for their feedback. One of them immediately reacted to the image showing a man with an arm up, a woman and child: "This is not inviting. The man looks angry and maybe violent." The team was very surprised because they did not see the image like this but with this feedback, they realized that indeed the image for the poster was not necessarily inviting. Based on the feedback, they designed a new poster.

3. VOTING IS NOT DECISION MAKING

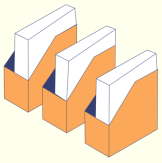
Underlying co-creation is the premise of an inclusive process where all voices are heard. However, these voices are rarely included in co-creation toolkits, in particular in the decision making process. They might be asked to vote on a pre-selected group of ideas, but voting is only one form (superficial at times) of participation. In the end, community members are rarely final decision makers.

While often reduced to different voting techniques to select “best”, “favorite” ideas or prototypes, decision making is more than the final stage of the project (when selecting the final idea to pilot and implement). In fact, it starts with the brief which is usually defined before the start of the project by the funders and / or lead organization. And community members are only invited to work on those specific pre-defined challenges, rather than being invited to shape them. They are left out in other important moments of the project. For instance, they are interviewed and probed for insights during research, but left out of the analysis and synthesis phase led by the facilitating team. The team informed by their expertise and knowledge framework such as design thinking or behavioral science develop the themes that will frame the brainstorming of solutions.

Community members are rarely invited to brainstorm. Most of the time, community members’ participation is limited to selecting between predefined options generated by the facilitating team: ideas or prototypes created to test some of the ideas generated by the facilitating team. **Seldom do toolkits mention how to manage the evaluation or voting process so that community members feel comfortable and legitimate to provide their opinion. They tend to ignore the fact that it is not enough to invite them in the room to consider that their opinions were included.**

How to develop a more inclusive and democratic decision-making process? Things might vary depending on the nature of the project and the funding mechanisms, however there are many ways to think of implementing a more inclusive and democratic decision-making process.

- First, it is important to remember that it starts with framing the scope of the project (and making sure your questions are relevant to the community and that they understand them).
- It also involves including community members in selecting the tools (like visual symbols or icebreakers).
- Consider shifting your role from decision-maker to convener whose role lies in bringing community members' voices to the forefront.

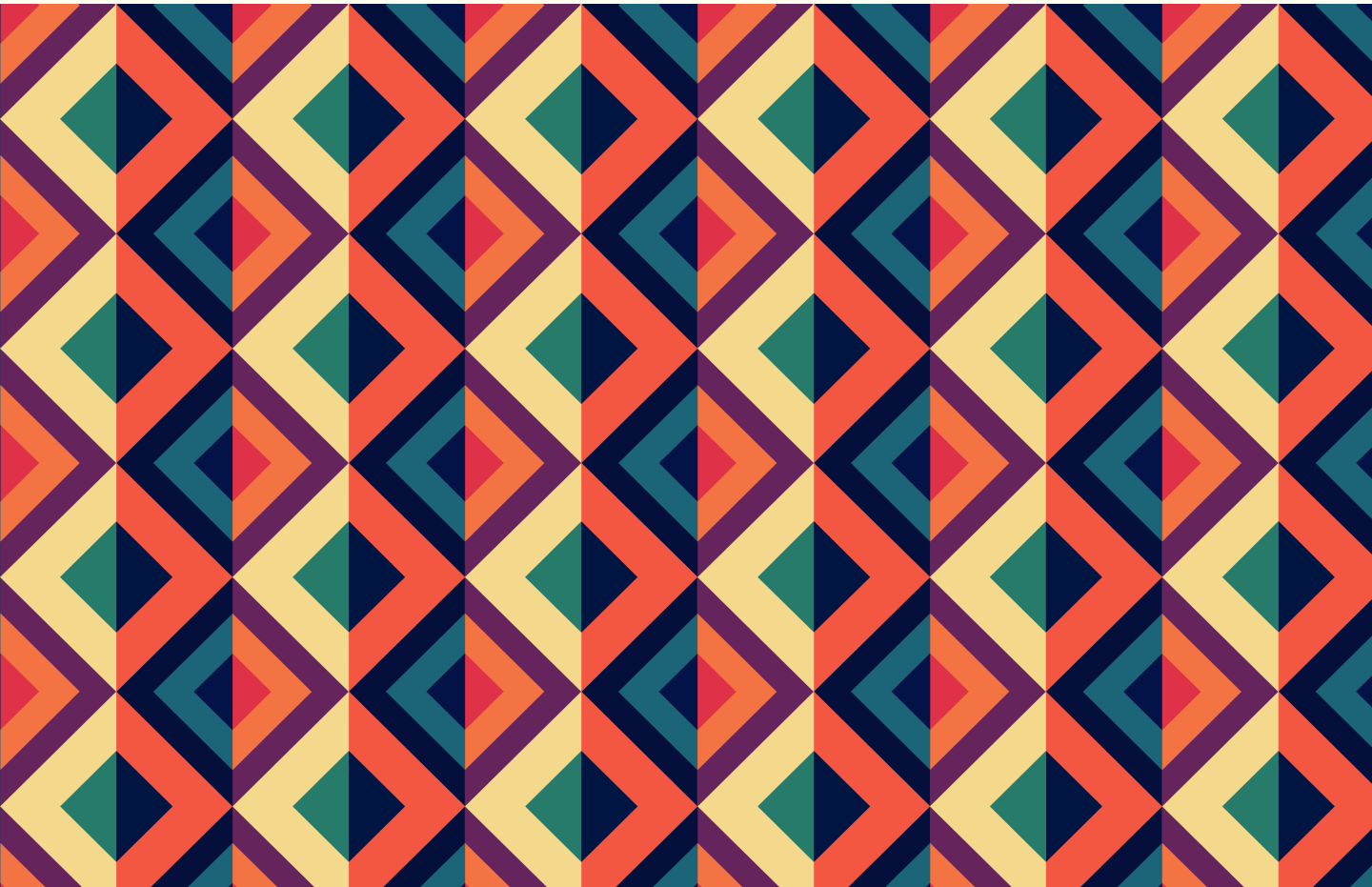


Story from the Field: Co-creating every step of the way

In 2017, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Jordan launched Mahali Lab where they invited Syrian refugees and vulnerable Jordanians to develop solutions to challenges that impact the communities. The lab's outset was simple, they wanted each decision to be driven by the community, every step of the way – including the selection of the challenges that impacted the communities. In most projects, the lead organisation would define the brief and choose what challenges they thought needed to be addressed. They would then invite the communities to work on them. But IRC did not do this. Instead, they set aside time at the start of the project to define the challenges to be tackled during the project. The facilitators first interviewed community members to generate the most important issues for the community members.Community members were eventually invited to vote on the shortlisted themes. The selected themes defined the areas that Mahali Lab's participants developed ideas for in the rest of the project[20].

Story from the Field: When co-creating does not follow through

A non-profit organization in Washington DC was looking to redesign the curriculum for their international summer service-learning program for high school students. They onboarded a team of two designers and four students from the program to work on it. The team employed what they call a "Radical Participatory Design" approach which meant including community members in all activities of all phases of the design process. However, once the project was presented to the organization, they rejected the students' decisions and did not implement them. This example illustrates how project organizers can struggle, despite their wish for co-creation, withdrawing decision-making power from the students, leaving them disillusioned with the process. Even if the designers here were taken by surprise, this is a great reminder that we should not over promise to the community members and make sure that they know the scope of the project and what are the best potential outcomes[21].



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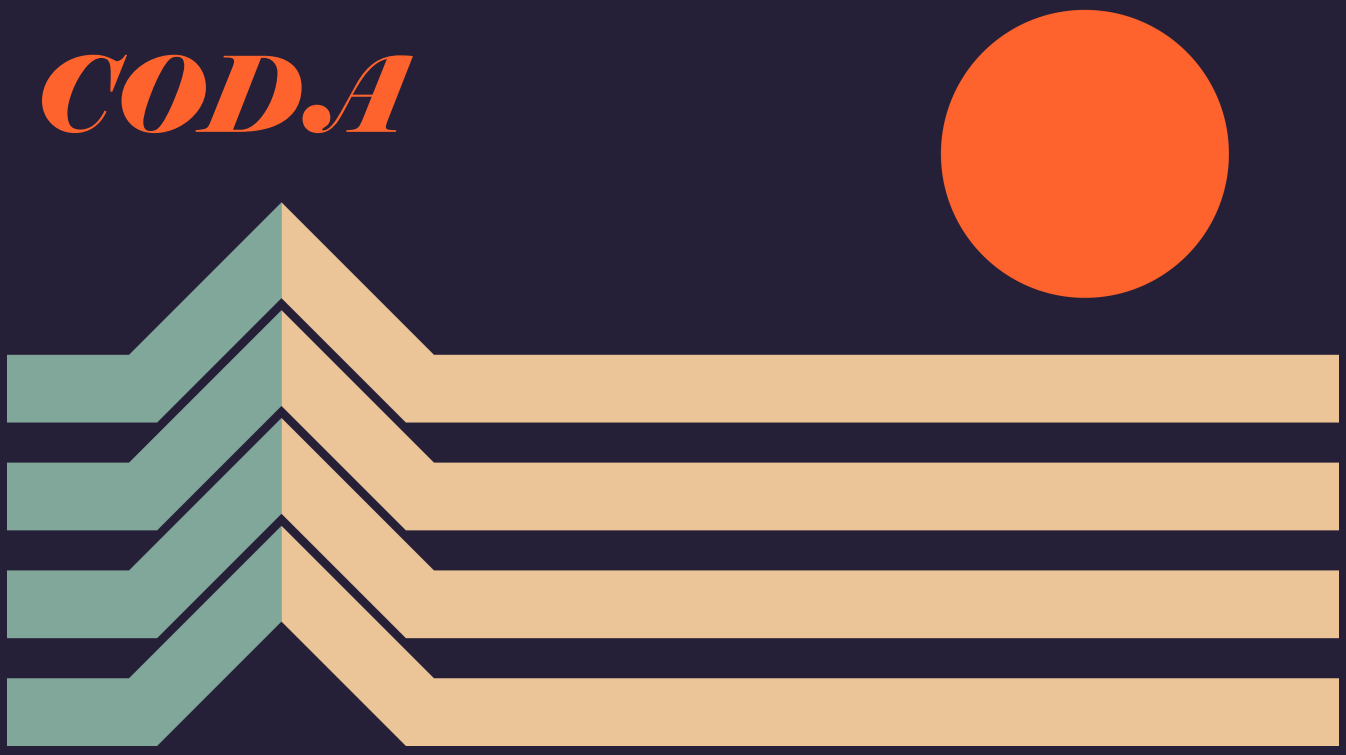

Most of the toolkits we reviewed emphasize the importance of testing assumptions, iterating based on feedback and embracing uncertainty. Yet, none mentioned what to do if the outcome from the project did not fit with the framing of the project's brief. What if the community members did not like an idea, or simply thought it would not help address their needs? What if in contrast, the idea developed or selected by the community members is in the end not implemented? Reasons for why an idea might not be implemented abound, but they are never mentioned. And the very idea of the final solution not being implemented is beyond "the end" page of the toolkit. However, this happens more often than not.

We cannot engage in a co-creation project without reflecting upon this issue. Participants are invited on the premise that the project will develop solutions *"for"* and *"with"* them. Hence, if the solutions they developed and / or chose are not implemented, and instead it's the solution selected by another stakeholder that is piloted, the message is obvious: their point of view does not have as much "value" as the funders' or other stakeholders'.

Funders are a key stakeholder in these projects, always absent from the toolkits, yet they are very powerful. As facilitators and organizers, we need to clearly articulate the design principles that inform our work and discuss them with funders beforehand.

It might seem difficult to have these conversations (what if the final outcome produced does not fit the original scope? What if what the community wants does not match the standards set by the funders?) but it might be easier to discuss this upfront than later in the process. In any case, as facilitators and organizers, we need to know where we stand.

We also need to set expectations with participants so that they are aware of the scope of what they can hope for, and what might happen, or not happen. If we know that there will be some specific constraints, it is important to be open and transparent about it from the start rather than promising a democratic decision making process; and in the end, ignoring the idea selected by community members because another (more powerful) stakeholder thinks it's not a good idea : "that's already been tried elsewhere without success" or "that's not our role". Enacting a fair process is essential: research has found that if people care about the decisions made, they care even more about the process.

In the end, toolkits tend to miss two important temporal dimensions of co-creation projects: the before (when the brief is scoped, when the outcomes are discussed with funders, etc.) and the after (which ideas end up being implemented or not). Often during the planning phase, it is important to think of the "after": What outcomes might emerge? What if they were different from the original brief? Whose voice is most powerful?

This companion invites you to start embracing three grounding principles – critical reflexivity, reciprocal relationships, and knowledge equity – as soon as you start planning the project. It reminds you that the social innovation project you are starting is a journey and that even if you might not be able to continue working on it, you need to think of potential afters, and communicate them to the different stakeholders.

Story from the Field: Designing beyond the brief

In 2021, YLabs, a global design and research organization working to improve health and economic opportunity for young people between the ages of 10–24 years, in Rwanda worked with youth in Rwanda to co-design a digital mental health platform. The project engaged young people at various stages, conducting most of its co-design workshops in youth centers, a space that was already a familiar gathering point for participants.

During the primary research phase, the youth shared some unexpected feedback: they wanted an offline version of the platform, something akin to a club. For them, discussing mental health in person made the initiative feel more real and meaningful than an online-only solution.

Although the project scope originally defined by the sponsor the project was to develop only an online platform, YLab did not overlook the youth feedback. On the contrary, they incorporated it and created an offline peer-support program that they presented to the founder, who asked for adding an online element. The team stayed put, arguing that the value of their work was in bringing in the youth's voice. They eventually convinced the sponsor, expanding the project beyond its initial online boundaries and ensured its adoption by the very youth it aimed to serve[22].

RESOURCES

This section lists all the toolkits we reviewed while writing this companion. In case you don't already have a specific resource or preferred approach, we provide a brief overview for each to help you select one for your project.

General toolkits to conduct Human-Centered Design (HCD) provide an introduction to the general methodology along with general exercises, and tips. All the toolkits listed below have a focus on social innovation, community and inclusion.

- The Human-centered Design Toolkit was designed and launched in 2009 by IDEO, a global design and innovation consultancy, in collaboration with International Development Enterprises (iDE), and with the support of Gates Foundation. It aimed to share human-centered design with the social sector.

- In 2015, IDEO.org the non-for-profit arm of IDEO (founded in 2011) launched an evolution of the HCD toolkit, the Field Guide to Human-Centered Design. Both toolkits involve various activities and tips for each of the design process. The Field Guide includes some exercises to help you engage the community you are working with during the inspiration and ideation phase.

- Community-Centered Design Toolkit: designed by 3X3, a minority and women-owned and managed organization that works with communities, civil society and public institutions to create social and civic transformation. This toolkit provides open-source tools and curated resources to advance participatory and community-centered practices around problem framing, ideation, and institutionalizing change.

- Co-Creation Toolkit: From design to implementation: developed by Oxfam, a global non-profit organization that works on fighting inequality to end poverty and injustice. This resource is for people in the process of planning a co-creation workshop. It is designed for short-term workshops.

- Accelerate Impact Guide to Human-Centered Design for Social Innovation: developed by Aga Khan Foundation, a global organisation rooted in Africa, Asia and the Middle East working on development issues. The nine-booklet toolkit adapts Human-Centered Design (HCD) for complex development settings. It recognizes varying levels of stakeholder engagement and adds a unique "pre-step" to help facilitators choose the right approach. It addresses power dynamics and includes a detailed guide to assess an organization's readiness for genuine community-led design.

- Participatory Action Research: a toolkit developed by the University of Reading, England. Aimed at community researchers, community organizations, students and academics who want to reflect on and better understand the principles and everyday practices of Participatory Action Research (PAR). It offers a unique compilation of diverse perspectives on forming community research teams and employing PAR to investigate local issues.

RESOURCES

Field-specific toolkits were developed by organizations focusing on a specific field (e.g. healthcare, migration) or population / group (e.g. children).

Doing research together: developed by NSW Regional Health Partners, an organization cultivating strong partnerships between the healthcare and academic sectors within the NSW region in Australia. The resource has tips and tools to help researchers, consumers, carers and health workers work as a team.

WorldPlaces: developed by Arab Women's Solidarity Association Belgium (AWSA- Be), an association which promotes the rights of women, looking to break stereotypes and create bridges between cultures. This resource provides advice on the topic of meaningful engagement and integration of migrant women. It can be applied by any organization providing services to or working at grassroot level with migrant, asylum seeking and refugee women and girls.

Child-centered design toolkit: developed by Save the Children, an international non-profit organization that focuses on issues faced by vulnerable children and young adults. This toolkit is aimed at professionals working on co-creating with children. It provides an operating model along with tips and tools to design with children.

Power and Participation: a guidebook to shift unequal power dynamics in participatory design practice by Hajira Qazi. It is structured as a set of reflective questions to be answered by the facilitator in various phases of the project's.

Our inspirations

Here are some practitioners whose work has deeply informed the creation of this companion. Their websites provide useful reflections, case studies and methods. We also had the chance to talk with some of these experts about their work and perspectives on co-creation. These conversations either explicitly cited or not have been inspired ideas, stories and practices discussed in this Companion:

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Ayah Younis
https://ayahyounis.com/
Designing learning experiences for meaningful impact March 2022, In Design Thinking Roundtable podcast.

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AUTHOR & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Author: Anne-Laure Fayard, ERA Chair Professor in Social Innovation, Nova SBE and Visiting Research Professor at NYU.

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