Our Data, Our Process:  
Re-imagining the Community-Led 
Monitoring and Evaluation Discussion

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Abstract  
In this article members of the Samahan para sa Pagsulong at Pag-unlad ng Capaculan (SPPC), a community-based group in the Philippines, demonstrate through their lived experience how Community-led Monitoring and Evaluation (CoLMEL) can be carried out. Their collaboration with their development partner Outreach Philippines Inc. and the co-authors of this paper introduces a new paradigm in which monitoring and evaluation serves as an emancipatory tool. It not only challenges the existing power hierarchies in the international and humanitarian systems by recognising community members as the owners of the knowledge and experience of CoLMEL, but it also benefits the community through improved self and collective efficacy, along with learning.

The paper explains what CoLMEL looks like in practice and distills the lessons from community practitioners to establish the factors that facilitate CoLMEL. It also proposes a new collaboration paradigm involving community members, funders, evaluators, and development partners to operationalise CoLMEL.

Key Words: community-led development, shift the power, community-led monitoring and evaluation, partnership in evaluation, power asymmetries in evaluation, rural Philippines, evaluation as capacity strengthening

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I. Introduction

There is growing recognition of the colonial legacy of international development and humanitarian spaces and the ineffectiveness of top-down, outsider-driven programmes in combating issues ranging from hunger and poverty to climate change and disease. Global consortia like the Movement for Community-led Development (Veda, 2023) and pacts including the Grand Bargain (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2017) have both emerged from and strengthened the calls to transform how these sectors operate. Funders, civil society organisations, and practitioners alike have begun to recognise the paramountcy of prioritising communities and local stakeholders in development. As these discussions have intensified, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) professionals have begun to examine their complicity in exacerbating power inequities (Emerson, 2020; Parkinson, 2009). The questions is whether instead of perpetuating the power inequities that contribute to social injustice and exclusion, can evaluations serve as tools to address them? This article suggests they can.

When communities undertake MEL activities to address their learning needs, they gain valuable insights to strengthen their programming efforts and enhance their quality of life. Additionally, they develop a sense of self-assurance in their capacity to drive positive transformations. Community-led Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (CoLMEL) enables them to overcome the sense of the learned helplessness (Gordon, 1985) perpetuated by traditional development sector initiatives and to step into their own power.

CoLMEL goes beyond engaging participants in the monitoring and evaluation activities. Instead, it considers who determines the purpose and pace of evaluations, who decides what data needs to be collected, and how and what that data signifies. Most importantly, it recognises the community as the rightful owner of the data, the knowledge gained, and the evaluation. But what does this look like in practice? What is the relationship between the evaluators, practitioners, and project participants in CoLMEL? Here, we respond to these questions, drawing from the work of Samahan para sa Pagsulong at Pag-unlad ng Capaculan (SPPC), a community group located in the Philippines’ Masbate province. We situate our response within the Shift the Power narrative (Hodgson & Knight, 2016) and VeneKlasen and Miller’s (2002) Expressions of Power framework. We believe that deploying community-led approaches to assess change can effectively tackle and dismantle power hierarchies perpetuated by conventional monitoring and evaluation practices that often disregard the capacity of local communities to not only conduct their own evaluations but also plan them. We propose a MEL model predicated on community and development partner collaboration in accordance with the Community First principle.
The article comprises five sections. In the introduction, we review existing monitoring and evaluation practices and the power inequalities they might perpetuate. The second section introduces Samahan para sa Pagsulong at Pag-unlad ng Capaculan (SPPC), or the Organization for the Advancement and Progress of Capaculan. SPPC is a community partner of Outreach Philippines Inc. (OPI), a non-profit based in Central Luzon, with operations in Nueva Ecija, Isabela, and Masbate provinces of the Philippines. We focus specifically on SPPC’s community-led approach for monitoring and evaluating their locally managed solar water system. The third section focuses on lessons gleaned from the experience. Here SPPC and the practitioners who directly support the group share more about their CoLMEL experiences: how they think about it, how they experienced it, and how they will adjust their approach for future evaluations. Section 4 explores how SPPC’s pilot programme represents the potential for monitoring and evaluation practices that prioritise local ownership and challenge the power dynamics inherent in the development industry’s approach to MEL. It distils the lessons learnt into a model for community-led partnership with development organisations based on the community first principle. The conclusion outlines six enabling conditions for CoLMEL, based on SPPC’s experience and discussions within the Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD), a global consortium of over 2000 local and international organisations committed to community-led development.


In December 2016, the Global Fund for Community Foundation hosted the Global Summit on Community Philanthropy under the #ShiftThePower banner, calling for “durable development” based on the three-legged stool of assets, capacities, and trust. (Hodgson & Knight, 2016) They noted that without local resources, leadership, and buy-in, development programmes would continue to fail miserably “because efforts to solve a problem only last while people with the problem take responsibility for it.” (p. 33) The phrase “Shift the Power” has since become a rallying cry for organisations and networks worldwide that support community-led development (CLD), locally-led development, and decolonisation.

Batliwala (2019) defines social power as “the capacity of different individuals or groups to determine who gets what, who does what, who decides what, and who sets the agenda” (2019, p. 13). The #ShiftThePower framework challenges existing power hierarchies in international development, arguing that power should shift from funders and external actors to communities because every person should have a voice in decisions that shape their lives. For monitoring and evaluation, this signifies a shift from conventional MEL approaches that privilege the needs of the funder and the knowledge of external specialists to CoLMEL which places the community at the centre of the MEL practice.
The concept of community participation in MEL is not new. Participatory evaluation approaches have sought to make participants (community members) active stakeholders in the evaluation process by involving them across various phases, including design, implementation, and analysis (Gujit, 2014). Community-based monitoring practices have long been used for HIV-AIDS monitoring (Global Fund, 2020), natural resource management, and service delivery. There have primarily been two types of CBM initiatives: checks-and-balance initiatives to hold local governments and implementing organisations accountable for results, through tools like community scorecards (Bjorkman & Svensson, 2009; Braithwaite et al, 2013 d’Cruz, Cadornigara & Satterthwaite, 2014; Baptiste et al., 2020; Kiracho et al., 2020) and citizen science programmes, which focus on natural resource management (Conrad & Hilchey, 2011).

CBM initiatives can vary from top-down ones, in which external agencies engage community members to collect data according to the requirements of implementing organisations or governments, to collaborative ones, where community members take the lead in establishing monitoring initiatives based on their own information needs (Danielsen et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2015). In the past, CBM has typically been at the former end of the spectrum, with outsiders deciding what should be monitored without understanding the local context of knowledge production and application. (Fernandez-Gimenez, 2008; McComb et al., 2018; Eicken et al., 2021).

Recent literature on community-based monitoring in indigenous communities, particularly in Canada and Australia, has raised concerns about ownership and control in CBM, and highlighted the colonialism embedded in the system that places western forms of knowledge and knowledge production at the top of the hierarchy (Cohen et al., 2021). Mamun and Natcher (2023) note that “Indigenous communities are concerned about the utilization of and establishment of rights over the data generated by these projects...The approach often favors science but puts Indigenous knowledge systems at a disadvantage (Carlson et al., 2017; Eicken et al., 2021).” Meanwhile, research on CBM within indigenous communities in the Arctic demonstrates a greater respect for traditional knowledge and an examination of power dynamics, particularly in relation to decision-making and ownership (Danielsen et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2015).

Thus, while participatory evaluation and community-based monitoring have contributed to discussions about the inclusion of local communities in evaluation processes, their failure to address the issue of power dynamics and power hierarchies inherent in monitoring and evaluation studies has frequently resulted in extractive practices. As Emerson (2020) notes, “Power asymmetries are important considerations in international development evaluations. Evaluation is not objective or value-neutral. Evaluators must take responsibility for their positioning.
understand whose interests are being served by their work, and reflect on how the outcomes they are measuring might be sustaining an unjust status quo (Greene, 2001; Trimble et al., 2012).” (p.2)

Power is a complex issue. VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) identify four expressions of power:

1) Power over: The conventional perspective on power signifies domination, control, or authority and views it as a “win-lose” situation. “Having power involves taking it from someone else, and then using it to dominate and prevent others from gaining it.” (p.39)

2) Power with: This is a more collaborative approach to power, focussing on solidarity and mutual support to identify common ground, build collective strength and take collective action. It has the potential to strengthen the power within.

3) Power to: This approach to power emphasises the capacity of every person to proactively shape their own lives. When based on mutual support, it can lead to power with.

4) Power within: This refers to an individual’s sense of self-worth and confidence gained through participation. It acknowledges differences even while respecting others.

Funders and development partners have used traditional MEL to exercise power over the Majority World (incorrectly referred to as the Global South) (Carden, 2013) and communities (Emerson, 2020).

These power hierarchies have perpetuated harmful dynamics including the termination of much-needed funding, a focus on accountability and effectiveness, the perpetuation of deficit-based narratives, and a top-down approach to programme development in which “evaluation contributes to the extraction and devaluation of community expertise rather than fostering learning, collaboration, critical reflection, and healing” (Ahrens et al., 2023, p. 197). Participatory MEL approaches sought to recognise the knowledge of communities and mitigate some of these harmful dynamics. However, due to their reluctance to confront power hierarchies in the realms of international development and humanitarianism, they frequently ended up “using” and “extracting” community knowledge in pursuit of external stakeholders’ and funders’ predetermined goals and objectives. The decision-making around what knowledge was collected, how, by whom and towards what end remained with the funders, commissioners, and evaluators, resulting in an imbalance of power that disadvantaged communities. These power imbalances impacted not just the willingness and ability of communities to participate in evaluations but also the level of trust between communities and development partners (Parkinson, 2009; Boadu & Ile, 2019). Without addressing power asymmetries, participatory MEL can exacerbate them, resulting in increased external control, and the exclusion of the most marginalised groups in a community, including the illiterate (Parkinson, 2009).
CoLMEL, on the other hand, is based on recognising the voice, agency, and capacity of communities, by both external actors (power to) and the communities themselves (power within). This power to is built on the acknowledgement of Hodgson and Knight’s aforementioned three-legged stool—assets (knowledge, resources, and experiences of community members), capacities (to plan, implement and use monitoring and evaluation), and trust (that enables members to not just share accurate data but to trust and use the findings that emerge from that data).

Within the CoLMEL framework, community members exercise power with each other as well as with development partners and evaluators, to gain better insights into what works in their context and how to improve it. This reinforces the power within communities, augmenting their sense of ownership. As community members see the results of programmes they have designed and enhanced, they begin to recognise their ability to shape their own lives and futures. The following sections show how CoLMEL can be operationalised through the SPPC experience. We focus specifically on how the group assessed the effectiveness of their solar water system through the implementation of community-led MEL practices.

III. The SPPC Experience: What We Did and How
On Method and Data Collection
This paper is predicated on an intervention carried out by SPCC in the coastal village of Capuculan in Masbate province of the Philippines in 2022. As of 2023, Capuculan had 412 households. Since the project’s inception, CoLMEL was integrated into the project design, and a total of 18 community leaders were involved in survey development, pre-testing, actual data collection, and a leaders’ level evaluation-reflection. The baseline survey for the CoLMEL exercise described here was administered between June 16, 2022 and June 20, 2022 with 399 respondents, and the endline survey was conducted between April 21, 2023 and April 27, 2023, with 412 respondents.

Given the centrality of questions of data collection and ownership in this article, we commence by outlining our process. To situate SPPC’s monitoring and evaluation experiences, we draw from three sets of data. The first set comprises the first-hand ethnographic accounts collected from field reports and meeting notes of community leaders, members, and practitioners. This type of data outlines the group’s background, community-led initiatives, and monitoring and evaluation efforts. Another dataset includes organisational monitoring data, which is collected annually by community leaders to track SPPC activities, membership numbers, and accumulated funds. The SPCC members and OPI staff work jointly to assist this process. The last set of data emerged from an SPPC group meeting during which leaders shared the results of their solar water system’s community-led monitoring and evaluation. The meeting included a session in which leaders and members reflected on the practice of CoLMEL and what they had learnt by participating in the process. With the
group’s permission, an OPI team member recorded the meetings and succeeding conversations. Also with the group’s permission, OPI staff, including Nancy (co-author of this paper), translated the reflections from Masbateños to Tagalog and subsequently to English. After analysing these reflections, Nancy identified the key lessons. This was shared with the OPI team members who validated the trustworthiness of both the data and subsequent analysis.

The group’s background and community-led activities
Samahan para sa Pagsulong at Pag-unlad ng Capaculan (SPPC), also known as the Organization for the Advancement and Progress of Capaculan, is a community partner of Outreach Philippines Inc. (OPI), a nonprofit based in Central Luzon, with operations in Nueva Ecija, Isabela, and Masbate provinces of the Philippines. Since the mid-1980s, OPI has been facilitating community-led development (CLD) by organising rural residents to eventually form registered community-based organisations (CBOs) with skilled leadership and long-term poverty-responsive programmes (Cloete & Dasig Salazar, 2022). OPI facilitators use a methodology known as Participatory Human Development (PHD) to encourage local community members to identify their most pressing poverty-related concerns, seek suitable solutions for such issues, which then take the shape of community-managed projects, and develop, at the same time, the organisational infrastructure needed to establish a CBO. 

Generally speaking, OPI provides support to community groups that have little or no prior experience in community organisation, project implementation and management, and leadership. A key objective of OPI staff is to strengthen community members’ capacity to manage their group and its operations, and to sustain such activities after OPI staff have concluded their official activities. OPI, together with its international partner Outreach International, have been facilitating development that is envisioned, planned, implemented, and subsequently managed by local communities. However, they have made limited efforts to actively engage in community-led project-specific monitoring and evaluation. Demonstrating the impact of community-led efforts in achieving these goals is not only immensely powerful in illustrating the potential of CLD, but it also equips community groups with the necessary evidence to advocate for more funding and opportunities at the local level.

Therefore, OPI and Outreach International decided to pilot a CoLME-L initiative to gauge the possibility, viability, and feasibility of facilitating such activities alongside local community groups. One group that agreed to participate in the pilot programme was SPPC, which was based in the coastal village of Capaculan, Masbate.

OPI began engaging with a core group of individuals in Capaculan in 2021. In early 2022, the group obtained official registration from the Philippines Department of Labor and Employment as
a recognised people’s organisation named SPPC. By June 2023, the number of household members in SPPC stood at 86. Since their collective action began in 2021, they have successfully obtained about $40,000 in funding. This financial support has been used to develop and implement eight community-managed projects related to food security, livelihood, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). Each project has a management committee, overseeing implementation and basic operational monitoring. The committees provide frequent updates to SPPC’s general assembly regarding the project’s inputs and outputs. These updates provide the general assembly time to contemplate whether they want to make any project adjustments. Consequently, all decisions are made at the local level, including the choice of project type, implementation timeline, and any essential adjustments or future plans.

The Pilot
One of SPPC’s major projects is a solar water system addressing Capaculan’s challenges around unsafe and unaffordable water. Like the rest of the island, several Capaculan households lack access to fresh and clean water. Instead, they rely on water entrepreneurs who deliver water sourced from neighbouring wells. Early in their development as a group, SPPC decided to refurbish an unused deep well in their vicinity with a solar water pump and lay a whole network of pipes to establish centralised water distribution points across Capaculan. However, to successfully complete this endeavour they required financial resources. With the support of an OPI staff member, SPPC developed their solar water solution idea into a project concept and an eventual proposal for funding. The proposal-making process included well-defined goals and objectives that had not just been formulated by SPPC leaders, but also during general assembly meetings. From the outset, all SPPC members were clear about the project’s overarching goals and objectives: to deploy a solar water system that could reduce the time required for people to acquire potable water and the cost typically associated with accessing clean water. The proposal-making process also included formulating an implementation and monitoring plan, in which members would collectively decide on the hows and whens of project roll-out and who will monitor such activities.

In early 2022, after SPPC’s financing proposal was approved, OPI staff consulted with the group on whether they would be interested in measuring more closely their project’s overall impact, or in other words, to what extent they have reached their collectively identified goals and objectives. SPPC gave its approval, and OPI’s CoLMEL pilot was officially underway.

Following more consultation with OPI team members, the group decided that they wanted to collect baseline data from all households designated as an intended water user. After revisiting their project’s goals and objectives and determining the necessary additional information they would need, including the membership status of households, a committee comprising 18 SPPC leaders, the OPI staff
member Renan Penagunda, and project managers started formulating the survey questions. They developed the latter on paper, and eight leaders manually collected data from 399 households in June 2022.

Nancy (co-author) and Renan collaborated to devise optimal strategies for promoting local ownership in SPPC’s monitoring and evaluation processes. They decided to first facilitate manual data collection so that the group could experience both processes and recognise the efficiency and effectiveness of electronic surveys. Given that this was also the first occasion for all leaders to participate involved in data collection activities, there were already too many new components. Nancy and Renan believed that the inclusion of an online survey might complicate the process. After leaders manually collected their baseline data, Renan introduced the KoboToolbox, an online platform for survey development and data collection. SPPC leaders were curious to learn about the KoboToolbox. The process included first training them on setting up their own email account, getting familiar with online technologies, and learning how to use the application for data collection purposes. Working with a computer and online technologies was a first for many.

Following these sessions, SPPC leaders successfully transferred their baseline data to the KoboToolbox, which gave them easy access to reports and visual representations. Renan and the leaders conducted a more in-depth analysis of the summarised data in light of these findings before presenting it to the group’s general assembly. Meanwhile, the solar water project’s implementation started, with SPPC members laying PVC pipes and building nine fetching centres as part of the water system installation. The water project was officially completed in June 2022, providing 399 households access to fresh water.

In April 2023, after one year of project management, the SPPC leaders collected their endline data, using digital tools directly this time. The leaders and Renan convened to analyse the data, distil learnings, and strategise on how they would share the results with the rest of the group. In July 2023, the leaders, with Renan’s support, convened a data analysis meeting with the general assembly. During this meeting, they examined both endline and baseline data to assess whether their project had achieved its initial objective. They also discussed further actions to be taken for the project.

The meeting also included a period of reflection and evaluation, enabling attendees to share their thoughts, impressions, and concerns about the substance of the meeting. SPPC leaders invited members who had helped design and execute the project’s monitoring and evaluation process to share more about their broader impressions and takeaways. Approximately 70 community members and leaders attended this meeting.

The next section includes some key takeaways that emerged during the reflection segment. Additionally, in February 2023, SPPC leaders engaged in a video reflection session where they
discussed their thoughts on the process of monitoring and evaluating data, which was driven by the community. During their discussion, they deliberated on the significance of community-led monitoring and what advice they would have for other community groups interested in collecting their own data. To preserve the authenticity of the video content and SPPC’s direct voices, we have included the video with subtitles as supplementary content to this article (See Appendix).

Photo 1: Novie, an SPPC leader, processing with members the changes in membership numbers before and after project implementation (Photo Credit, Keren Sia).

Photo 2: Bong, an SPPC leader, processing with SPPC members the results of the pre- and post-survey data, including facilitating recommendations stemming from these results (Photo Credit, Keren Sia).
IV. How did it go? Learnings from SPPC

SPPC members’ reflections highlight five areas of their CoLMEL efforts, each having implications for monitoring and evaluation practices.

The first area focused on survey development. The field practitioner facilitated a review of SPPC’s project goals and the development of indicators and survey questions derived from them. Initially, five major indicators were considered: (1) Presence of a water source; (2) Availability of the water source; (3) Time spent in collecting water, (4) Number of households who spend money for water; and (5) Amount of money spent on water. During the discussion, leaders introduced two additional indicators to determine the extent of community participation: the number of SPPC members and the number of households willing to participate in the maintenance of the water system project. The field practitioner facilitated the development of survey questions for these seven indicators such that they aligned with the monitoring and evaluation requirements of the SPPC leaders in the project.

During the reflection exercise, Bong, who is part of the water project committee, said, “The survey questions need to be double-checked before they are administered. It is necessary to first make sure that the data that we want to obtain can be obtained through the questions we have developed. When we created the survey questions in KoboTool, we immediately deployed them. So, when we started entering the data into Kobo Collect, we saw that there were questions that needed to be improved to get the appropriate answer.” Hence, two survey questions were modified before administering the endline survey. The open-ended questions on the time spent on collecting water, and the amount of money spent on water were converted to multiple-choice ones to facilitate better analysis.

The second area of reflection pertains to data collection, specifically who collects the data and the methods used for data collection. Community members’ reflections unequivocally demonstrated that when they drive their processes, they experience a higher level of trust and ownership over the data. For one member, trust comes with who the data collectors are. The member explained that she “responded properly to the survey questions conducted by our leaders. I feel more comfortable being interviewed by our leaders than by others.” In this case, ‘others’ refers to enumerators external to the community.

The reflections also highlighted additional details regarding the methods of data collection, specifically the aspects of data quality and verifiability. As Bong said, “For me, it is important that we take time and remain focused on the survey because, based on my experience, if you do it wrong, you need to repeat it. Data validation and analysis could be slow, but sure.”

For Bong, data collection should be done carefully so that the group does not have...
to revisit the respondent to complete the survey. This happened with them during the baseline data collection phase. Bong also emphasised the need to conduct data validation processes meticulously (methodically) and with certainty (precision). As leaders, they need to scrutinise the survey results to provide an accurate analysis, which they can then share with the larger group.

The third area that members’ highlighted in their reflections pertains to the analysis and sharing of data, including how both leaders and members render their data actionable. During the data analysis, leader Novie (photo 1) reported that the number of households willing to participate in the project’s maintenance increased from 65% to 70% for all households in the area. When reflecting on this data point, the leaders noted that SPPC was able to strengthen its water project by installing additional pipes and constructing additional fetching centres through monthly dues of the residents. Leaders emphasised that increasing contributions was one way of expanding their project. Following this analysis, a member shared, “I learned that I should participate in the maintenance of our water system project here in our barangay⁴, so that it can be sustained.” Another leader shared that their evaluation provided them with insights on how their project had contributed to positive change in water accessibility. Equipped with this data, they could now contemplate potential areas and methods for improving their initiative to facilitate a more impactful change in their community.

A fourth area of focus pertains to SPPC members’ and leaders’ curiosity, not only about data but also the processes and activities associated with monitoring and evaluation. Initially perceived technological challenges evolved into opportunities for ongoing learning and usable results. Cheryl, one of the leaders actively involved in the evaluation design and the data collection process shared the following:

I was a little nervous about creating an account in KoboToolbox, and developing survey questions because it was my first time using a computer, computer but when I learned how to use it, my fingers didn't want to leave it. In downloading data from KoboTool, I was having a hard time with Excel at first because there was a discrepancy between the actual number of surveys and the number of surveys in Excel. I kept trying until I finally got it. I am glad I learned how to download and retrieve data.

Even though Cheryl was apprehensive about her ability to operate technologies she had never used before, this did not deter her from trying. This endeavor bore resemblance to an on-the-job training opportunity that not only bolstered her confidence in operating a computer and utilising software, both of which were new to her, but also contributed to strengthening the group’s capacities. CoLMEL, therefore, served as

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⁴ A barangay is the small administrative unit that forms the first tier of local government in the Philippines.
a capacity-strengthening activity that enabled SPPC to develop computer literacy skills while increasing their self and group efficacy.

Access to technology made things easier to understand after the initial learning and adjustment phase. Like most SPPC members and leaders, Irene had no previous experience working with computers, and software, let alone data. During the reflection session, she confessed that “because I am interested, I learned how to use it,” making the data more digestible to her and her group members. “I was able to prepare charts and graphs,” she said. “Data is easier to understand with charts and graphs,” she added.

A fifth area of reflection pertains to improving the community’s monitoring and evaluation processes. Leaders discussed how their current data set and related experiences enabled them to evaluate potential adjustments to the kind of data they would need in the future. They also explored strategies for modifying their surveys to collect this data. Thus, their current dataset established a foundation to strengthen their capacity to ensure more robust future evaluations, not only for their water project but also for other activities, including food loan and income generation.

V. Discussion: What the SPPC pilot teaches us about power in monitoring and evaluation

SPPC’s CoLMEL approach was rooted in the community-led practices of OPI and recognised the centrality of community members. Community members collectively identified an issue, namely water availability, determined the approach they would take to resolve it, and defined success. Subsequently, they discussed how they would measure this success and devised processes to do so. The SPPC model therefore recognized the power to initiate change that was inherent in every community member and sought to encourage them to exercise this power with each other collectively. This has led to an increase in not just power with but also power within. Community members described how gaining knowledge of and the ability to implement new technologies strengthened their sense of self and collective efficacy, as well as their ability to make more informed decisions about their collective action project. This also enabled them to engage more community members to expand and sustain the project. The SPPC pilot demonstrates that communities can successfully plan and implement monitoring and evaluation activities, which in turn may serve as instruments for mutual capacity enhancement.

The OPI team members played a crucial part in SPPC’s process by introducing the idea of CoLMEL. However, their main responsibility throughout the process was to facilitate and strengthen capacities, rather than taking decisions. That power
was vested with the community leaders, and OPI made no attempt to take it away. In this, the SPPC pilot diverged greatly from not just traditional evaluation practices but also participatory evaluation and community-based monitoring approaches. Community members not only engaged in specific or even all aspects of the evaluation process, they designed and implemented it in its entirety. And they did so for a project that was also designed and implemented by them. Consequently, the pilot prioritised learning and adaptation, over accountability and advocacy. This contrasts with CBM practices where communities often collect data on services provided by others and use this data to hold them accountable and advocate for improved service delivery.

Unlike in CBM, in CoLMEL the community is at the centre, not just as beneficiaries and consumers of a service, but also as decision-makers and planners. They do not just provide feedback within a system where they hold little or no power, but actively design, adapt, and implement the programme. Cohen et al (2021) point out that because of its unwillingness to challenge the power dynamics and the inherent colonial systems in place CBM can “despite the apparent integration of Indigenous people into decision-making processes......reinforce existing hierarchies of knowledge, economics, and power.” In contrast, CoLMEL is fundamentally an act of a community exercising its power responsibly. And it happens when both the community members and the development partners first recognize the power of communities.

While this may lead to accountability, it is not carried out for that purpose. As the SPPC pilot demonstrated, it is instead a learning-oriented collective action exercise that can result in growth, improved outcomes, greater self and collective efficacy, and interconnectedness.

Similarly, although the participatory evaluation approaches in theory sought to involve community members as decision makers in practice, the decision on who to involve, when and for what purpose remained with the evaluation commissioners. Frequently, participation transpired within the parameters set by evaluators and the financial resources at their disposal. Due to the prevailing power hierarchies in our field, participation was frequently leveraged to extract “better” and “cheaper” data from community members.

Gujit (2014) identifies three questions as the starting points for using participatory evaluation approaches: “(1) What purpose will stakeholder participation serve in this impact evaluation?; (2) Whose participation matters, when and why?; and (3) When is participation feasible?” (p.3). These questions illustrate the fundamental difference between CoLMEL and other participatory evaluation approaches. Stakeholder participation, particularly from the community, in CoLMEL serves a broader purpose beyond only enhancing accuracy, relevance, establishing causality, or improving programmes. It is about communities exercising their power of decision-making responsibly. As such it is always feasible, because the
timing of the exercise, its scope and its purpose is decided by the community. Furthermore, who participates is decided by the community members themselves, albeit through a facilitated process where development partners try to ensure inclusion.

The emancipatory potential of CoLMEL
It has often been argued that communities have neither the time nor the capacity to undertake monitoring work. The SPCC approach rooted in CoLMEL however demonstrates that when evaluations address the basic questions of power and ensure decision-making - about what is evaluated, when, how and to what - end lies with the communities, community members are not just willing but eager to strengthen their capacities to undertake the work. This approach diverges substantially from both CBM and participatory evaluation approaches that value the knowledge and experience of the communities but in failing to address the power dynamics often end up becoming a tool for extracting information from community members without sharing ownership with them.

The closest parallel to CoLMEL is community-based participatory research that strives to be both pragmatic and emancipatory (Hacker, 2013; Peralta & Murphy, 2016). Regarding the former, local people know their reality best and, therefore, they should, from a practical standpoint, lead inquiries into a more detailed understanding of such realms. From a social justice standpoint, local communities should drive decision-making processes and own the data, and subsequent activities that come from any research activity focused on and related to their immediate social worlds (Tuhiiwai Smith, 2012). This emancipatory objective is reminiscent of Judi Chamberlin’s “nothing about us without us” slogan, actively demanding inclusion, recognition, and local voice of the ‘subjects’ of public conversations and analyses (Lathouras, 2020, p. 95).

CoLMEL seeks to address the power-blindness of participatory approaches by ensuring that the community retains ownership of not just decision-making but also of data and information. It ensures that community members are not dispossessed of their traditional knowledge, conventional wisdom, and everyday information. Since decision-making around how the knowledge from CoLMEL is used is with the community, it also minimises the threat of communities being portrayed in adverse light without adequate context and the discontinuation of funding. CoLMEL, when implemented in its true spirit, has the potential to liberate communities from the power hierarchies imposed by traditional development and humanitarian systems.

The role of evaluators and practitioners in CoLMEL
The CoLMEL model applied by SPPC does not exclude the role of development organisations or evaluators (commonly referred to as FPEs - field practitioners and evaluators). As noted earlier, OPI and its international partner, Outreach International, were critical to the SPPC pilot. However, unlike traditional MEL systems, which place funders and development partners at the top of the
power hierarchy, CoLMEL recognises the voice, power, and ownership of communities, and underscores the importance of collaboration between communities and development partners based on the community first principle. The role of FPEs is that of facilitators not decision-makers.

Figure 1 demonstrates how this collaboration may function in CoLMEL. It examines the five primary steps in the MEL cycle and highlights the roles of communities and FPEs in each of them in CoLMEL. Unlike conventional evaluations, where power to decide the purpose and learning questions lies with funders and development partners, in CoLMEL communities decide what success looks like and frame the learning questions, typically (but not always) in a process facilitated by a development partner. FPEs play a role here in introducing the idea (as in the case of SPPC) and/or facilitating an inclusive and reflective process that enables communities to exercise power with each other. Similarly, when it comes to data collection and analysis; as in the case of SPPC, community members determine which data must be collected and how.

The FPEs extend continued support by ensuring access to tools, technology, and a facilitated process, if necessary. Additionally, FPEs can assume a critical function at this juncture by ensuring that data collection tools and processes are non-exclusionary. Data analysis is led by community leaders, with support from FPEs, and validated with the larger community. Finally, community members decide what action should be taken based on the findings and by whom. The role of FPEs at this stage is to support them in taking the action required through funding, connections, and access.

Most importantly, in CoLMEL, all these learnings, and the data belong to the community. The FPEs may learn alongside them and from the data. They can also disseminate the findings widely as often it is the development partners who have access to global dissemination platforms and the time and resources to do so. Nevertheless, it is crucial to ensure that this dissemination is carried out with the informed consent of the community and recognises the community's generosity in sharing both data and knowledge.
This CoLMEL model automatically challenges the current power hierarchies in international development. It marks a shift in power from the development partners to community members. Monitoring and evaluation in CoLMEL are no longer exercises in which the minority world (incorrectly referred to as the Global North) sits in judgment over the communities. Rather, it is a space where communities and development partners exercise power with each other, strengthening both the power within communities (and community members), as well as power to communities.

**Conclusion**

This article showcases our learnings both as SPPC and as practitioners working with SPPC. It demonstrates not just how CoLMEL can be carried out, but also presents a collaborative model to effectively implement CoLMEL and, consequently, redistribute power. It showcases what is possible when funders and development partners place their trust in community members and their capacities. We are aware that SPPC is not alone. Communities in different parts of the world have shown us that CoLMEL is possible (Sangol et al., 2014). Nevertheless, CoLMEL requires a set of enabling conditions.

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5 This model draws on MCLD’s CoLMEL evaluation cycle, developed through a global collaborative process led by Gunjan Veda (co-author) with the support of Elene Cloete
First and foremost, it requires a fundamental belief in the power, potential, and possibility that exists in every community. Funders and development partners need to transform their own mindsets. At the same time, they must be open to sharing power and establishing genuine partnerships with communities, based on the community-first principle. CoLMEL can only take place when the program or project itself is community-led, as was the case with the solar water system.

Second, CoLMEL necessitates a close examination of power differentials, both between development partners and communities, as well as within the community itself. Research on participatory monitoring and evaluations have demonstrated that “power-blindness” often stymies effective participation by community members in MEL processes, making “the rural poor consider programme participation as a cost, and weigh it against potential benefits, rather than viewing it as inherently valuable” (Parkinson, 2009, p. 237).

Third, while technology can be a great enabler, access to technology is neither easy nor uniform. Access to the internet and electricity for operating simple online tools remains a challenge in many parts of the world. Community members need not just training and access to technology, but also the infrastructure necessary to employ it. Besides, time is a scarce resource, and just like CLD, CoLMEL places heavy demands on the time of community members. When these demands are predicated on a timeline established by external actors, they have the potential to significantly impair the relationship between communities and development partners or discourage community members from engaging in the MEL process. CoLMEL operates under the premise that community members will decide the intensity and pace of the MEL activities.

CoLMEL necessitates the allocation of resources. Financial resources are necessary for training community members, ensuring access to technology and the internet, and organising community meetings and data collection. These must be adequately integrated into programme and project funding.

Finally, CoLMEL necessitates a change in journal publication guidelines. Veda and Chilisa state that decolonising MEL “requires not just a rethinking and redoing of how, why and for whom MEL is carried out, but also of how learning is generated and documented, whose voices are heard and through which media” (2023, p.80). The same holds true for CoLMEL. If community members own the data and the lessons learnt, they should be able to share it in their own voices. That is what this article seeks to do. By acknowledging the primary authorship of the SPPC and incorporating video materials in their own voices, this work not only aims to adhere to the collaborative principles outlined here, but also to remind us why it is important that more community voices are heard in scholarly journals and other knowledge dissemination platforms.
Note on authorship
The narrative is owned by SPPC, namely the leaders who participated in the pilot and led the exploration. We, Gunjan Veda and Nancy Bobadilla, are merely narrators, situating SPPC’s narrative within a broader disciplinary, theoretical, and contextual framework.

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Declaration of conflicting interest statement
The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.
References


Appendices
Video of SPPC’s first set of reflections: https://youtu.be/lRvYV7DRGQQk