

# Key Commitments of the Grounded Accountability Model

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The [Grounded Accountability Model \(GAM\)](#) is a participatory research approach designed to empower communities to set a vision for success in peace, security, justice, and other key areas of their lives. It enables communities to co-create indicators with practitioners that reflect their priorities and lived experiences, strengthening accountability to these communities by driving program design and adaptation, monitoring and evaluation, and advocacy.

Flexibility, sensitivity, and adaptability are essential in implementing GAM to ensure that it effectively serves community needs. This document outlines specific commitments essential to the effective application of GAM as a participatory research approach, as well as challenges and limitations for evaluators and researchers to consider as they adapt it to various contexts.<sup>1</sup>

**1) A consensus-driven process between practitioners and diverse groups representing a local community.** The consensus-driven process emphasizes collaboration, inclusivity, and transparency at every stage, ensuring that the development and utilization of localized indicators align with community needs and aspirations.

- a) Practitioners can begin by engaging local communities through various channels such as meetings or online platforms to gather input and insights.
- b) They should work collaboratively with community members and stakeholders to define clear goals for the development of localized indicators. This includes identifying the specific hard-to-measure concepts that are important to the community and determining which key concepts, including peace, are most relevant.<sup>2</sup>
- c) Facilitate discussions and workshops to ensure consensus among stakeholders regarding the goals and objectives of localizing indicators. Encourage open dialogue, active listening, and the integration of diverse perspectives to build agreement.
- d) Co-designing a plan for developing, prioritizing, and selecting indicators may involve workshops, surveys, or participatory decision-making techniques that actively involve community members.
- e) Establishing a feedback loop to gather input from the community in later stages, such as utilization of findings and insights from the community, is also crucial.

**2) An intentional reflection process on what constitutes a “community” in this case and who participates.** Practitioners using the model should take time to carefully consider what constitutes the community they hope to engage to ensure rigor, clarity, and inclusivity in the process of mobilizing participants (e.g., geographic locations, sub-groups that you want to be represented).

- a) The community is defined around specific AND shared everyday experiences. A community, therefore, could be geographically defined, but it could also be defined more broadly to encompass a group of people with the same affiliation, occupation, ethnicity, or a specific life experience.

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<sup>1</sup> The commitments outlined here pertain specifically to practitioners of the Grounded Accountability Model (GAM), under the assumption that they have a comprehensive understanding of research ethics within social sciences.

<sup>2</sup> All stakeholders should be clear as to why localized indicators will be co-developed with community members. Discuss this with program teams, implementation partners, and community representatives.

b) Intentional reflection by practitioners should examine how the participant selection process interplays with dividing lines. They should reflect on their own positionality and communicate with participants transparently about who was included and not included, and the logic behind the selections.

c) Practitioners should also reflect on power dynamics within communities, especially if they invite formal or informal leaders to participate in discussions. Practitioners and facilitators need to anticipate in advance how this may affect the group dynamic, and whether everyone will be comfortable participating regardless of leaders' presence.

d) When working across dividing lines (e.g., ethnic, religious, political), practitioners should plan to hold separate discussions when necessary to ensure that the participants feel safe to convene and to speak openly. Practitioners running this process are responsible for capturing and accounting for disparate experiences and voices from communities across dividing lines. e) However, practitioners may pay particular attention to certain groups or individuals' experiences and resulting indicators based on their mission and/or project goals.<sup>3</sup>

Practitioners should document the process of defining the community and who they decide to invite to their discussions and why. This will help to keep track of the decision-making process.

**3) Engagement of a community to set expectations and agree on a process for sharing and using results before co-developing indicators.** Practitioners should consult community members early on to understand how they want to be engaged in the process and how they will reflect on and use indicators once they are developed, and set expectations accordingly.

a) It is important to be transparent about what is and is not possible for the convening organization to address in the short, medium, and long term.<sup>4</sup> This commitment is especially important for local organizations or individuals using GAM who may not have the resources of INGOs or governments.

b) GAM practitioners, program implementers, and relevant community mobilizers or representatives should discuss and agree when community members will be available and whether they plan to participate in all the different stages (e.g., co-developing, prioritizing/voting, analyzing, sharing and using).

**4) A commitment to co-ownership of data with the community.** Ensure that community members have access to the co-developed indicators, have been given credit, and have a clear understanding of next steps. Co-ownership practices may range from support in documenting the data in writing to supporting the community by storing the digitized data on their behalf. Co-ownership also means that the data is not just gathered and absconded with, but the practitioners continuously engage with that community around those indicators.

a) Once practitioners have co-developed indicators, they should make sure community members have a chance to participate in a voting/validation exercise.

b) Practitioners need to consider how they would like to give credit for co-developing indicators. This may be a formal or informal acknowledgement and recognition of their work. At the same time, there are a number of precautions that practitioners should take to honor privacy, safety,

<sup>3</sup> For example, if your broader work or project aims to help victims of gender-based violence (GBV), your team would be more attuned to the experiences of GBV victims rather than the perpetrators or experiences of law-enforcement representatives.

<sup>4</sup> You can prepare a set of key messages, captured in a one-page document if appropriate, that the representatives of your organization or community mobilizers will use in reaching out to potential participants. This will ensure that you are all on the same page and are providing the correct information so that people can make informed decisions before joining the workshop. The same explanation should be repeated at the beginning of the discussion as well. Additionally, it is considered good practice to avoid relying on authority figures to convene people. This ensures that power dynamics are minimized, and that community members do not feel obligated to attend the discussion.

and security of local communities.

c) When working with vulnerable groups within communities, practitioners should keep information about participants confidential and not share it widely if that might have repercussions for the participants.

d) Consider data protection practices carefully. How will the data be stored, with whom, and how will the collectors ensure safe storage?

e) Practitioners may give the data back to the community in multiple ways - from short briefs that highlight key takeaways to video and oral presentations that can be delivered via town hall meetings, online webinars, or in-person gatherings. Consider building activities like these into the project to ensure continuous engagement with community members after GAM discussions.

f) Practitioners may choose to help local civil society organizations and initiatives to identify action plans based on localized indicators so that the ownership of acting on indicators can also be shared.

**5) Development of indicators that are specific and meaningful to a community's lived experiences.** The indicators co-developed through GAM should make sense to the people in that community. Such indicators would not require excessive explanation but should, rather, elicit a shared understanding among members of the community who may not have participated in the GAM process. Findings and analysis from the GAM process should be validated with the community to ensure they are accurate and meaningful in reflecting their lived experiences.

a) Indicators are 'meaningful' when they speak to the lived realities of community members. They are 'meaningful' when they are relevant to the challenges and grievances that community members share. They are also 'meaningful' if they represent community members' most desired changes and priorities.

b) Practitioners of GAM can only generate specific and meaningful indicators with communities when the facilitators are well-prepared. It is imperative that the facilitators are introduced to the GAM approach via training and resources available.<sup>5</sup> It is also recommended that facilitators run several mock workshops and practice developing localized indicators if they do not have prior experience.

c) Prior to starting the discussion, GAM practitioners should explain to the participants what indicators mean in simple terms.<sup>6</sup>

d) Indicators on their own do not explain why people share certain experiences and prioritize some challenges over others. To get to the "why," practitioners should validate localized indicators with other stakeholders in the community. This can be done by bringing indicators to town hall discussions if possible, or by triangulating indicators with other analysis (e.g., conflict analysis) and existing literature.

**6) A commitment to act upon localized indicators to improve responsiveness and accountability to that community.** Practitioners should ensure that there is organizational will, time, and budget to act upon the final indicators in order to improve accountability towards community priorities and experiences. Key ways to put indicators into action are by integrating them into monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), program activity/design and adaptation, and/or advocacy.

<sup>5</sup> You can find resources for GAM practitioners on: <https://cnxus.org/gam/>.

<sup>6</sup> This can be done through simple examples, first using an example of a thermometer that we use to measure someone's body temperature, then shifting to examples of how we gauge someone's mood by paying attention to their behavior, and ending with examples of indicators such as "paved roads" that people tend to take as signs of "development," "good governance," and so forth.

- a) This involves incorporating locally relevant metrics into larger monitoring and evaluation frameworks, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of context-specific factors. By translating these localized indicators into measurable parameters, it facilitates systematic data collection and analysis, aiding in informed decision-making and program improvement.
- b) Practitioners can use localized indicators in baseline, midline, or endline MEL surveys in the form of Likert-scale statements, or they can inform their focus group discussion tools by adding in-depth questions drawing from localized indicators. The idea is that localized indicators co-developed with some representatives of the community can be further gauged with a broader set of representatives in the given context.
- c) Practitioners can also use localized indicators in their program activity design and adaptation to ensure that their programming responds to the community's lived experiences and priorities.
- d) Practitioners may use localized indicators in advocacy as well.

**7) Explicit acknowledgment and transparency on positionality, agendas, and limitations that researchers have in relation to this process, context, and community.** By openly addressing these factors, researchers can approach their work with greater sensitivity and accountability.

- a) This is an incredibly important consideration for practitioners. GAM practitioners should take Do No Harm principles into account when designing their process so as not to inflame tensions or be needlessly provocative. But, at the same time, they need to listen to what communities have actually gone through, even if it does not match up with the opinions of the facilitator, other participants, or the organization bringing them together.
- b) Facilitators should be cognizant about topics that are deemed sensitive in a given setting and be prepared to navigate the conversation around such topics with sensitivity. They should incorporate conflict-sensitive and trauma-informed research approaches, especially if they are preparing to lead a conversation with a vulnerable group who has gone through traumatic experiences.
- c) If practitioners are writing a report based on their GAM workshops, they should consider adding a discussion of the limitations and possibilities of the results depending on their experience in a given context.
- d) Practitioners should consider building channels of horizontal dialogue between peer researchers and NGOs, as well as communities, to get feedback on what is being done and what for.

Part of the commitment to GAM is to be engaged in learning and sharing with other practitioners and funders working in these contexts to continually elevate the lived experiences of communities and strengthen accountability to them. There is an active community of practice dedicated to this knowledge sharing and exchange on ConnexUs: <https://cnxus.org/event/grounded-accountability-model-community-of-practice/>.