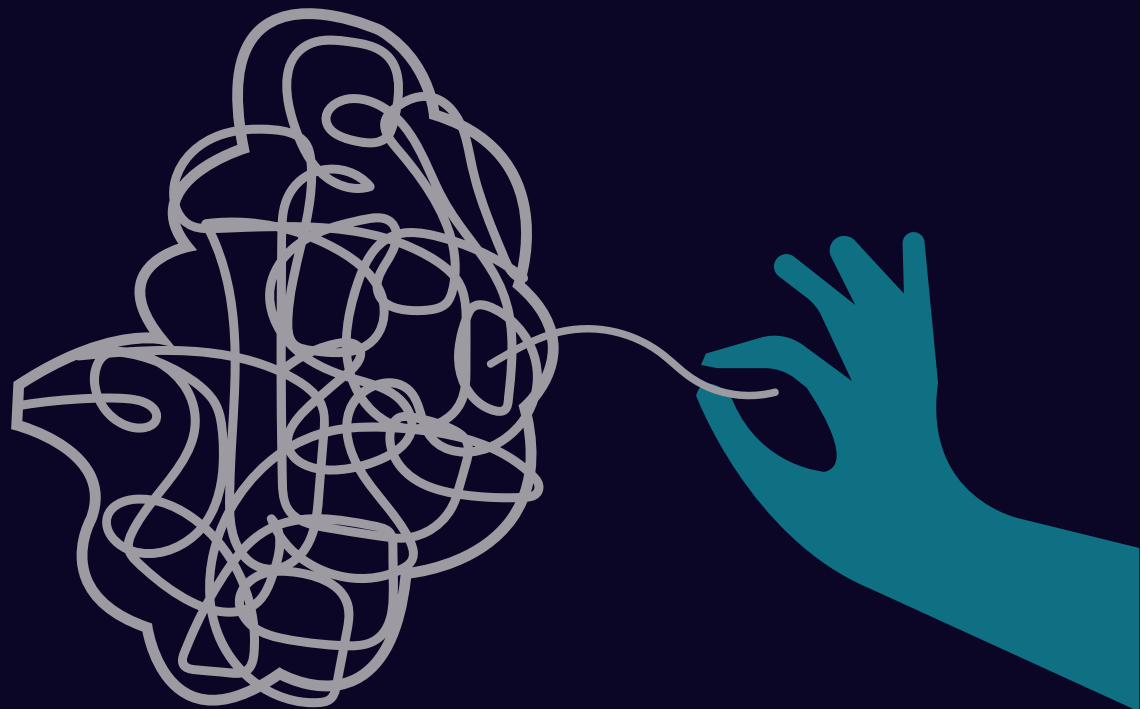



# **Measurement in Complexity: Rethinking Indicators for Peacebuilding**

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# Introduction

In development and peacebuilding, measurement is a widely accepted necessity. However, in complex contexts, where problems are multidimensional, shifting, deeply situated, and involve multiple stakeholders, the way we measure can create unfavorable incentives and even distort what we are trying to transform.

For years, we have built monitoring and evaluation systems designed for stable contexts, with linear trajectories of change and easily quantifiable results. But the reality we face, especially in territories marked by inequality, conflict, institutional distrust, and historical exclusion, does not fit into an Excel cell.

The question is no longer just “what do we measure?” but “how do we do it without reducing complexity to a list of deliverables or isolated figures?” Measuring in complex environments involves recognizing the non-linearity of processes, emergent changes, the importance of relationships and symbolism, and the need for information systems that not only record what has happened but also guide what could happen.

Because what is measured defines what matters, and what matters defines how we act. The debate on indicators is not exclusively technical: it is political, methodological, and deeply ethical.





# When Excel is Not Enough: The Limits of Traditional Indicators

Field experience shows us that traditional indicators, focused on control and accountability, often fail to capture what is essential.

First, they assume a linear cause-and-effect relationship. However, in challenges such as peacebuilding, local governance, or conflict transformation, results are emergent and not always predictable. Change occurs through accumulation, interaction, pattern disruption, and rarely within the timescales required by a logical framework. For example, in processes involving the reintegration of ex-combatants, financing productive projects does not automatically lead to economic and social inclusion. Many other variables are associated with these outcomes and escape traditional measurement.

Second, traditional indicators focus on the visible and quantifiable, neglecting intangible but central elements: trust, perceptions of legitimacy, the quality of dialogue, and the empowerment of historically silenced actors. A coexistence project may report that 15 dialogue spaces were held, but this does not reflect whether people felt safe to speak. In contexts where armed actors are still present or where fear of reprisals persists, silence itself is an indicator.

Third, setting indicators at the beginning of a project and tying them to financial incentives reduces the ability to adapt. The indicator becomes the goal rather than the tool and often ends up being managed for compliance, not for learning or transformation.





# Qualitative Is Not Optional—It Is Structural

For years, qualitative methods have been relegated to a soft complement to the supposed rigor of quantitative data. But in highly complex contexts, qualitative approaches are not an alternative; they are a necessity for understanding the dynamics of change.

Designing measurement systems that integrate qualitative methods—interviews, narratives, observation, life histories, discourse analysis—does not mean sacrificing rigor. It means recognizing that what drives transformation is rarely captured in numbers alone. A hybrid system, combining narrative and quantitative evidence, can offer a more realistic, situated, and useful perspective to guide decision-making.

## Four Ways to Redesign How We Measure

Rather than abandoning measurement, we need to transform it. Here are four complementary pathways:

1. **Context-Adapted Indicators:** Not all territories face the same challenges, nor do they respond the same way to interventions. Using the same indicators across different realities creates distorted readings and ill-informed decisions.
2. **Every day and Participatory Indicators:** Communities can identify local, simple, and powerful signals that reflect relevant changes. The use of public spaces, store closing times, or the presence of teachers in rural schools can be more legitimate indicators than externally imposed metrics.
3. **Measurement Systems That Guide Action:** Measurement cannot simply justify interventions; it must be a tool for learning, adjusting, and transforming. We need systems that allow us to read processes as they unfold, recognizing progress, tensions, and lessons learned.
4. **Agreements for Complex Phenomena:** Although it may not always be possible to design unique indicators for each territory, common frameworks can be established to measure complex phenomena, incorporating elements such as trust and perceptions of justice that allow for comparison while recognizing local specificities.

# What Might Peacebuilding Measurement Look Like?

Processes like territorial peacebuilding provide a key laboratory for rethinking measurement. Many of its transformations are bottom-up, emergent, situated, and often invisible to traditional evaluation frameworks. We propose mixed, multi-scalar, and participatory approaches to broaden the understanding of what counts as change and to pose a fundamental question: Who decides what is worth measuring?

Instead of measuring only from the intervention design, this approach starts by recognizing the forms of community agency that already exist. Peace is not produced exclusively by the State or by international cooperation; it is built through everyday practices that strengthen the social fabric—from a minga repairing rural roads to a women's network organized around violence reduction or a community action board mediating conflicts without resorting to violence.

Capturing these transformations requires combining different levels of analysis:

- **Micro Level:** Life trajectories, perceptions of safety, interpersonal trust, and sense of agency.
- **Meso Level:** The evolution of social organizations, connections with institutional frameworks, and resilience in the face of risks.
- **Territorial Level:** Institutional coordination, trust in institutions, access to services, local governance dynamics, and conflict dynamics.





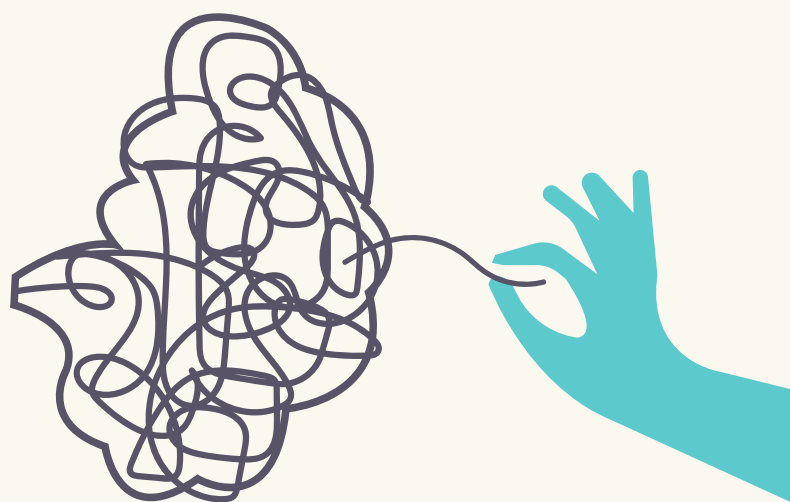


The proposal is not to oppose qualitative and quantitative methods, but to integrate them. Indicators such as meeting frequency, leadership rotation, or access to conflict resolution mechanisms can be complemented with testimonies, participatory mapping, or discourse analysis. This integration provides a denser, more situated reading of change processes.

Furthermore, measurement tools should be co-created with local stakeholders. Sharing data with communities, using it in assemblies or collaborative spaces, and allowing its revision throughout the intervention cycle turns measurement into a space for dialogue, reflection, and shared decision-making.

## Measuring What Matters

The question is not whether to measure but how to do so in a way that enhances rather than limits transformation. Measuring what matters is one of the most urgent challenges in development and peacebuilding in complex contexts like Colombia. This challenge, like all complex matters, is not solved with standard solutions but with thoughtful design, dialogue, and the willingness to think differently.



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