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A Capability to Practice Framework for Evaluating Behavioural Change Across West African Peacebuilding Programmes

Joseph Abazaami

jabazaami@uds.edu.gh

Research Article

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Abstract

Peacebuilding programme evaluation has long defaulted to counting what is easy to count such as training sessions held, participants registered, and policy briefs printed, rather than asking what essentially changed in the communities and organizations that programmes were designed to serve. This article challenges that habit directly. Drawing on the End-of-Project Evaluation (EoPE) of the Research and Action for Peace Network (REcAP), a four-year EU-funded initiative spanning 18 countries in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin, I examine the conditions under which peacebuilding investments produce behavioural and practice-level change that outlasts the project cycle. The consortium comprising the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) implemented a rich mix of capacity-strengthening, research, knowledge exchange, and policy engagement activities. Using a theory-based, mixed-method evaluation design that incorporated outcome harvesting, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and a beneficiary survey (n = 325), the evaluation shows that skills acquisition, peer-to-peer practice diffusion, and organizational ownership were the most durable and credible pathways to change. Digital knowledge exchange and policy advocacy, by contrast, delivered far less. From this evidence, I develop a Capability-to-Practice (C2P) framework that maps three levels of programmatic impact (output delivery, behavioural internalization, and systemic institutionalization) and identifies the enabling conditions that drive transitions between them. The article closes with implications for monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) design in complex, multi-country peacebuilding programmes.

1 Introduction: The Output Trap in Peacebuilding Evaluation

Peacebuilding sits in an epistemologically uncomfortable position within international development policy. Unlike infrastructure programmes, where success can be measured in kilometers of road or clinics built, and unlike public health initiatives, where it shows up in mortality rates and vaccination figures, peacebuilding operates in the realm of relationships, behaviours, and perceptions. These resist straightforward quantification, and that resistance has produced a persistent methodological reflex: report what was done rather than what changed [1, 2].

The consequences of this reflex are significant. When evaluation frameworks reduce programme success to a list of activities such as workshops conducted, publications released, and platform users registered, they systematically screen out the more consequential, if harder to measure, transformations that determine whether peacebuilding investments leave anything behind in communities and institutions. This is not simply a measurement problem. It is a problem of incentive structures. When outputs become the primary currency of accountability, implementers face structural pressure to pursue what is visible and countable, even at the expense of the slower relational work that truly builds capability and changes behaviour [3, 4].

This article makes both an empirical and a theoretical contribution to that debate. Empirically, it draws on the End-of-Project Evaluation of the Research and Action for Peace Network (REcAP), a 48-month regional initiative implemented from February 2022 to January 2026 across 18 countries in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin. Funded by the European Union Foreign Policy Instrument and implemented by WANEP, DRC, and SIPRI, REcAP is an unusually rich empirical site. Its multi-country scope, mixed-method evaluation design, and explicit focus on capacity-strengthening as a change mechanism make it well-suited for examining the conditions under which behavioural and practice-level change realsitically occurs. Theoretically, the article develops a Capability-to-Practice (C2P) framework that distinguishes between three analytically distinct levels of programmatic impact and argues that sustainable peacebuilding outcomes are most reliably generated when interventions are grounded in locally owned, capability-led approaches embedded in pre-existing civil society and community structures.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on peacebuilding evaluation, Theory of Change frameworks, and behavioural change measurement. Section 3 describes the REcAP intervention and the EoPE methodology. Section 4 presents the core empirical findings. Section 5 develops the C2P framework. Section 6 draws out implications for MEL design and programme theory. Section 7 concludes.

2 The Evaluation of Peacebuilding: A Critical Review

2.1 The Logic Model Tradition and Its Limits

The dominant approach to peacebuilding programme evaluation has been shaped by the logic model tradition, most clearly embodied in the results-based management (RBM) frameworks adopted by major multilateral donors, including the UN system, the European Union, and bilateral development agencies [3, 5]. Logic models assume linearity: inputs converted into activities generate outputs, which produce outcomes, which accumulate into impact. The appeal is obvious because the framework is clear, and it generates the kind of indicator-driven data that institutional donors require.

The critique of logic models in peacebuilding contexts, however, is equally well established. The linearity assumption is ill-suited to the non-linear, recursive dynamics of conflict and recovery, where causality runs in multiple directions simultaneously and outcomes are shaped by contextual factors far beyond programme designers' control [6, 7]. Short-term, measurable results tend to be privileged over longer-term, relational changes that may matter far more for sustainable peace [3]. And the preoccupation with quantifiable outputs can distort programme design itself, pushing implementers toward visible, countable activities at the expense of effective ones [4].

The specific challenge of attribution such as determining what causal contribution an intervention has actually made to an observed change is particularly acute in peacebuilding contexts. Outcomes are shaped by dense webs of political, social, and historical factors that interact with programmatic inputs in ways that are complex and often unpredictable [6, 8]. In this environment, the standard counterfactual

logic of experimental or quasi-experimental evaluation is often inapplicable, both practically as randomization is impossible in conflict-affected settings, and theoretically, since the unit of analysis in peacebuilding is typically a social system rather than an individual or household.

2.2 Theories of Change and the Behavioural Turn

In response to these limitations, a growing body of evaluation scholarship has argued for a shift from logic models to Theory of Change (ToC) approaches that make the causal assumptions linking programme interventions to intended outcomes explicit, and that provide a framework for testing those assumptions against evidence [9, 10]. ToC frameworks offer several real advantages in peacebuilding contexts. They can represent non-linear causal pathways, including feedback loops, emergent effects, and threshold dynamics. They foreground context, recognizing that the same intervention may produce different outcomes in different settings depending on how programme mechanisms interact with local conditions. And they direct attention to intermediate outcomes such as the attitudinal, relational, and behavioural changes that are often the proximate drivers of longer-term systemic change.

That last feature is central to the argument developed here. A growing strand of peacebuilding scholarship has argued that the most durable and transformative changes generated by peacebuilding interventions are not captured in output metrics, but in shifts in beliefs, behaviours, skills, and social relationships [1, 11]. These behavioural and practice-level changes (observable modifications in how individuals and organizations act in conflict-affected contexts as a result of programmatic engagement) are both harder to measure and more meaningful than counts of training sessions or policy publications.

The methodological literature on behavioural change measurement in peacebuilding has evolved considerably. Outcome harvesting, an approach that starts from observed outcomes and works backwards to assess programme contribution, rather than starting from predetermined indicators and measuring performance against them, has become widely applied across complex international development programmes [12, 13]. Collaborative, participatory evaluation designs that engage beneficiaries as co-producers of evidence, rather than passive subjects of measurement, have similarly been found more likely to surface the kinds of behavioural and relational changes that matter most for sustainable peace [9, 14].

2.3 The Gap Between Research and Practice in Peacebuilding Policy

A further dimension of the output trap concerns the relationship between knowledge production and policy influence, a tension that sits at the heart of the REcAP programme design and emerges as one of the evaluation's central findings. The assumption that evidence, once produced and disseminated, will naturally flow into policy decisions has been identified as one of the most persistent and problematic assumptions in the peacebuilding and development literature [15, 16]. Research products not translated into formats that are accessible, actionable, and relevant to the decision-making contexts of policymakers and practitioners are unlikely to change practice, however rigorous their content.

This research-to-policy gap is exacerbated in fragile and conflict-affected contexts by a range of structural factors: constrained civic space that limits the circulation of politically sensitive findings; weak institutionalized channels between research communities and decision-making bodies; high staff turnover in government ministries and donor agencies; and the time pressures facing practitioners operating in volatile security environments [15, 2]. The REcAP evaluation offers important new evidence on the conditions under which this gap can be narrowed, and more importantly, on the alternative mechanisms of change that generate practice-level impact when direct policy influence proves elusive.

3 Research Context and Methodology

3.1 The REcAP Programme: Design and Context

The Research and Action for Peace Network (REcAP) was a 48-month regional peacebuilding programme running from February 2022 to January 2026, with a one-year No-Cost Extension, funded by the EU Foreign Policy Instrument under the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace. The programme spanned 18 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Its overarching objective was to strengthen the role of civil society in peacebuilding, crisis management, and prevention of violent extremism, while enabling more informed decision-making by policymakers.

The consortium brought together three partners with distinct comparative advantages: WANEP as lead implementer, providing regional legitimacy and civil society infrastructure; DRC contributing practice-oriented programming and training expertise; and SIPRI ensuring research credibility and methodological rigour. The programme Theory of Change envisioned an organic linkage among a regional expert network, online knowledge exchange, production of research and policy products, capacity-building activities, and advocacy actions. Seven output clusters were defined: network establishment; production of studies; sharing of results; an online knowledge platform; coordination and collaboration; audience-tailored dissemination; and capacity strengthening.

The programme context was characterized by significant and escalating instability, particularly in the Sahel sub-region. The emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) following military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger fundamentally altered the regional political architecture during implementation, a contextual shift not anticipated in the original programme design, which significantly constrained operations in three of the eighteen target countries and forced adaptive adjustments in the consortium's engagement strategies. This experience resonates with a growing body of scholarship on complexity-aware programming in fragile states, which emphasizes the necessity of built-in adaptive management mechanisms to respond to unpredictable political shocks [6, 7].

3.2 Evaluation Methodology

The End-of-Project Evaluation was independently conducted by Endogen Global Consult Ltd. over November 2025 to January 2026, covering the full implementation period from February 2022 to January 2026. The evaluation adopted a theory-based, mixed-method design structured around the OECD/DAC evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability [5].

The methodological approach drew on five primary data collection and analysis methods. A systematic desk review covered the programme's results framework and logframe, annual narrative reports, the Mid-Term Review, financial documentation, activity reports from all 18 countries, knowledge products (15 policy briefs, 7 working papers, and a main edited volume), and Theory of Change documentation. Key Informant Interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of consortium partners, EU-FPI representatives, EU Delegation personnel, national focal persons, civil society actors, and research network members across eight focus countries: Benin, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. Focus Group Discussions with community-level beneficiaries surfaced practice-level and relational change. A structured beneficiary survey administered to 325 participants across all 18 programme countries used a five-point Likert scale to capture skills acquisition, behavioural change, knowledge application, and confidence levels. Finally, outcome harvesting was applied following the methodology of tracing contributions to observed outcomes rather than measuring performance against predetermined indicators, an approach now well-established in complex peacebuilding evaluation [12, 13].

Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) analysis was applied to disaggregate findings by output cluster, enabling systematic examination of how contextual conditions interacted with programme mechanisms to shape outcomes. Triangulation across data sources was employed throughout to assess the confidence level attached to each major finding. Ethical protocols included informed consent, anonymization of informant identities, and sensitivity procedures for data collection in politically restricted contexts.

4 Findings: The Mechanisms of Behavioural and Practice-Level Impact

4.1 Capacity Strengthening as the Primary Mechanism of Change

The evaluation's most robust and consistently triangulated finding concerns the primacy of capacity strengthening as a driver of change. Across all 18 programme countries and all data sources, KIIs, FGDs, the beneficiary survey, outcome harvesting, and annual reporting; capacity strengthening emerged as the output cluster that most reliably converted programmatic inputs into observable outcomes. Over 2,200 beneficiaries (approximately one-third women and one-third youth) engaged with participatory training, mentoring, and dialogue facilitation activities across 63 capacity-building sessions involving 108 organizations.

The significance of this finding lies not simply in the numbers, substantial as they are for a programme operating in complex and fragile contexts, but in the quality and durability of the changes produced. The evaluation distinguishes analytically between three types of change that emerged from the capacity-strengthening pathway. The first is skills acquisition: the internalization of concrete competencies in conflict analysis, mediation, dialogue facilitation, early warning, and gender- and youth-inclusive facilitation approaches. Approximately 60% of harvested outcomes reflected skill acquisition. Survey respondents most frequently identified conflict analysis tools, dialogue and mediation techniques, early warning frameworks, and gender-sensitive facilitation approaches as the most valuable knowledge gained. This is consistent with recent evidence from comparable capacity-strengthening programmes in fragile contexts, which shows that skills-based training consistently outperforms knowledge dissemination alone in generating durable practice change [4, 14].

The second type of change, and the one that carries the greatest analytical significance for the argument developed in this article, is behavioural change: the observable modification of how individuals and organizations act in conflict-affected contexts as a result of acquired knowledge and skills. Approximately half of harvested outcomes showed evidence of improved conflict prevention practice and behavioural change. Over half of survey respondents reported having facilitated peace dialogues or mediation sessions using REcAP-acquired skills. Approximately three-quarters reported having shared REcAP knowledge with others. Critically, these behavioural indicators were strongest among respondents who had participated in trainings, workshops, or dialogue activities, rather than those exposed only to standalone research products, a finding with significant implications for programme design.

The third type of change is diffusion and replication: the cascading extension of skills and practices beyond direct programme participants into wider community and organizational networks. This was perhaps the evaluation's most striking finding, suggesting that REcAP's impact extended well beyond the boundaries of formal project activity. In Nigeria, civil society actors trained under REcAP replicated training content by mentoring peers and community volunteers. In Sierra Leone, REcAP skills were absorbed into Local Peace Committee activities, with dialogue facilitation and early warning practices reported as ongoing functions of these structures. In Ghana, peace actors continued applying conflict analysis and dialogue facilitation tools independently, convening community dialogues using REcAP methodologies in conflict-prone areas after the project ended. In Côte d'Ivoire, civil society organizations adapted REcAP concepts into locally relevant formats, including simplified language and culturally appropriate facilitation styles; a degree of ownership and contextualization that signals deep rather than superficial learning. This diffusion dynamic aligns with community-of-practice effects documented in recent studies of civil society capacity-building in conflict-affected environments [9, 4].

4.2 The Limits of Output-Centric Components: Research, Platform, and Policy

The contrast between the performance of the capacity-strengthening pathway and the performance of other output clusters provides the empirical foundation for the conceptual argument developed in Section 5. Three programme components: research production and dissemination, the online knowledge-sharing platform, and policy influencing; consistently underperformed relative to the behavioural and practice-level changes generated by capacity-strengthening activities.

Research production generated substantial outputs: 15 policy briefs, 7 working papers, an edited volume, and 2 mentee publications. However, the translation of these outputs into applied uptake was uneven. The evaluation found strong evidence that research products gained significantly greater traction when integrated into training curricula, used as case studies in dialogue settings, or translated into facilitation tools and operational frameworks. Research disseminated primarily as reports or briefs, without accompanying engagement activities, saw far more limited uptake. A recurring observation across key informant interviews was that 'research became actionable when it was unpacked and worked through with practitioners', a formulation that precisely captures the research-to-practice translation mechanism that the evaluation identified as most effective. This is consistent with the growing literature on evidence-to-action translation in peacebuilding, which emphasizes that written research products require active mediation to become practice-relevant knowledge [15, 16].

The online knowledge-sharing platform was consistently identified as the programme's least effective component. Low usage figures, limited interaction, and contextual constraints, particularly unreliable internet connectivity in Sierra Leone, Liberia, The Gambia, and Cameroon, combined with misalignment between platform-centric assumptions and actual user behaviour to produce an output that was technically delivered but functionally inert as a knowledge exchange mechanism. At the time of the evaluation's submission, the platform was inactive following the expiry of its maintenance agreement, rendering knowledge products generated through it inaccessible to potential users. These findings reflect broader evidence on the limitations of digital-first knowledge exchange strategies in low-connectivity fragile contexts [8, 10].

Policy influencing achieved only partial success. Dissemination activities raised awareness and supported community-level uptake, but the absence of systematic follow-up, dedicated policy liaison functions, and institutional brokerage mechanisms constrained translation into formal policy influence. This reflects broader structural constraints: constrained civic space in several countries, weak research-to-policy translation channels, frequent turnover of EU Delegation focal persons, and AES-related restrictions in the Sahel sub-region. These structural factors align with evidence from comparable regional programmes documenting the limitations of advocacy-first policy influence strategies in contexts where institutional channels are weak and civic space is closing [16, 3].

4.3 Ownership and Sustainability: Where Benefits Persist

The evaluation's sustainability findings reinforce the argument about the primacy of capability-led pathways. Sustainability prospects were strongest at the level of embedded capabilities, skills, and practices, precisely the outcomes generated by the capacity-strengthening pathway. Individuals and

organizations that participated in training and dialogue activities demonstrated continued application of REcAP tools and approaches after the formal project period. In Liberia, women and youth participants trained through REcAP assumed facilitation roles in community dialogues after project activities concluded. In Benin and Cameroon, research findings introduced through REcAP were translated into practical guidance for civil society programming, with organizations using these insights to adjust their conflict prevention strategies.

By contrast, the sustainability of collective goods (the regional network and the digital platform) was assessed as considerably more uncertain. The regional network, while successfully established in formal terms with an approved Operational Framework and Charter, faced persistent challenges of weak ownership, unclear governance, low commitment from members (particularly European partners), and the absence of a viable financing mechanism. Engagement was episodic rather than continuous. The evaluation's conclusion that 'networks-as-relationships proved more durable and impactful than networks-as-institutions' captures a finding with significant implications for the design of future regional programming. This distinction between relational and institutional forms of networked coordination resonates with recent theoretical work on network governance in fragile contexts [9, 6].

5 The Capability-to-Practice (C2P) Framework

5.1 Conceptual Foundations

The empirical findings presented in Section 4 call for a conceptual framework that can account for the differential performance of the REcAP programme's output clusters, and that can generate actionable insights for programme design and evaluation in complex peacebuilding contexts. The Capability-to-Practice (C2P) framework developed here draws on the evaluation evidence and on the literatures in peacebuilding theory, organizational learning, and complexity-aware evaluation.

The framework distinguishes between three analytically distinct levels of programmatic impact in peacebuilding contexts. The first level, output delivery, captures the most commonly measured dimension of programme performance: the production and delivery of goods and services to intended beneficiaries. Training sessions conducted, publications produced, platform users registered, and events organized all fall at this level. Output delivery is a necessary but not sufficient condition for impact. It establishes that something happened but tells us nothing about whether that something produced a lasting change. This limitation has been consistently identified in the evaluation literature as the most fundamental gap in conventional MEL design [1, 11].

The second level, behavioural internalization, captures the transformation of delivered outputs into sustained changes in how individuals and organizations think and act. Behavioural internalization occurs when a training participant not only acquires knowledge in a session, but applies it in their subsequent professional practice; when a community peace actor not only receives a facilitation guide, but develops confidence in using it independently; when research findings not only reach practitioners, but change

how they frame and address conflict situations. This level of impact is both more meaningful and harder to measure than output delivery, and it is the level at which the REcAP programme demonstrated its strongest performance. The framework builds on and operationalizes the 'behavioural turn' in peacebuilding evaluation [9, 10], providing a structured diagnostic for distinguishing surface from deep levels of change.

The third level, systemic institutionalization, captures changes at the level of policies, institutional practices, and structural conditions. It includes the formal incorporation of new approaches into government policy, the sustained transformation of organizational procedures within civil society groups, and the development of durable regional coordination mechanisms. This is the level at which the REcAP programme demonstrated its weakest performance. The analysis suggests this is not primarily a function of programmatic failure, but of structural constraints (constrained civic space, inadequate research-to-policy channels, and AES-related access restrictions) that limited the conditions under which systemic change was achievable within the programme timeframe.

5.2 Mechanisms and Enabling Conditions

The C2P framework identifies a set of enabling conditions that determine whether programme investments translate from the first level to the second, and from the second to the third. The transition from output delivery to behavioural internalization depends on three enabling conditions that the REcAP evidence consistently supports. Foremost, participatory, practice-oriented methodology: training and engagement approaches that are locally determined in their content, interactive in their format, and immediately applicable in the professional contexts of participants are more likely to generate behavioural internalization than didactic or abstracted approaches. This is well supported by comparative evidence from peacebuilding capacity development programmes across sub-Saharan Africa [14, 4]. Additionally, tool provision and reuse: the provision of concrete, reusable tools such as facilitation guides, conflict analysis frameworks, and dialogue methodologies, that participants can independently apply in their practice and adapt to local contexts dramatically increases the probability of behavioural internalization. Moreover, gender and youth inclusion: the evidence suggests that inclusive approaches, which actively integrate women and youth not merely as participants but as facilitators and leaders, generate deeper and more durable behavioural change, both in the included groups and in the wider community and organizational cultures with which they interact [9].

The transition from behavioural internalization to systemic institutionalization depends on a different and more demanding set of conditions. The evidence from REcAP and from the broader literature suggests this transition requires dedicated policy liaison functions, institutionalized research-to-policy translation mechanisms, sustained engagement with decision-making bodies over time, and enabling political and civic contexts that permit the circulation of sensitive findings and the advocacy of reform [15, 16]. Where these conditions are not present, the practical implication for programme design is not that policy influence should be abandoned as an objective, but that it should be pursued through a distinct and appropriately resourced strand of programming, rather than being assumed to flow automatically from the production of research outputs.

5.3 Applying the C2P Framework: Implications for Theory of Change Design

The C2P framework has direct implications for the design of Theories of Change in peacebuilding programming. ToC frameworks in this sector frequently contain an implicit assumption of linear progression from output delivery through behavioural change to systemic impact. The REcAP evidence challenges that assumption. It suggests, rather, that the transitions between levels are not automatic but contingent on enabling conditions that must be explicitly designed for, resourced, and monitored [9, 10].

Applied to the REcAP ToC, the framework helps explain why capacity-strengthening and relational learning assumptions were consistently validated while digital engagement, sustained regional networking, and research-driven policy uptake assumptions were only partially validated. The former set of assumptions was supported by enabling conditions such as participatory methodology, tool provision, inclusive facilitation, and pre-existing community and civil society structures that the programme delivered effectively. The latter required enabling conditions such as institutional buy-in, incentive alignment, connectivity infrastructure, and policy windows that were either under-resourced in programme design or structurally absent in the operating environment.

6 Implications for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Design

6.1 Measuring What Matters: Moving Beyond Output Metrics

The most direct implication of this analysis for evaluation practice concerns the design of MEL systems for complex peacebuilding programmes. The REcAP evaluation found that the programme's formal MEL system was robust at output and participation levels but compliance-oriented rather than adaptive, with limited real-time tracking of behavioural institutionalization and cross-country diffusion. Output-level monitoring generated data useful for administrative accountability but insufficiently informative for programme learning and adaptive management. This finding is consistent with the emerging consensus in evaluation scholarship that output-focused MEL systems produce accountability information without learning intelligence [11, 10].

A MEL framework informed by the C2P model would complement output-level monitoring with systematic measurement of behavioural indicators. Such indicators might include: the frequency and quality of post-training application of acquired skills; the degree to which trained participants report confidence in independently facilitating dialogue processes; the extent to which research findings are incorporated into the programming decisions and advocacy strategies of civil society partners; and the presence and quality of diffusion, which is the degree to which skills and approaches cascade beyond direct programme participants into wider networks. Outcome harvesting, as applied in the REcAP evaluation, is a particularly well-suited methodology for capturing these dimensions, since it starts from

observed outcomes rather than predetermined indicators and enables evaluators to surface unanticipated impacts that may be more significant than those originally planned for [12, 13].

6.2 Adaptive Management and Contextual Sensitivity

The REcAP experience also illuminates the critical importance of adaptive management capacity in complex, multi-country peacebuilding programming. The programme was conceptualized before the Alliance of Sahel States emerged, and no clear adaptation strategy existed for the ECOWAS-AES dynamics or restricted access in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The absence of a context adaptation protocol, including predetermined triggers, decision rights, and alternative implementation modalities for responding to political and security shocks, reduced the programme's responsiveness to one of the most significant contextual developments of its implementation period. This gap reflects a broader challenge identified across the complexity-aware programming literature: the persistent failure of programme design to build structured adaptation pathways alongside the primary Theory of Change [6, 7].

More broadly, the evaluation found that MEL mechanisms, while formally present in templates, quarterly reporting, and steering committee meetings, did not consistently function as adaptive tools. Follow-up to steering committee recommendations relied largely on bilateral exchanges and partner initiative rather than structured action-tracking. The evaluation's recommendation to strengthen MEL as an adaptive function (through an independent MEL lead, an explicit learning agenda, and quarterly pause-and-reflect sessions) reflects a principle well supported in the complexity-aware evaluation literature: that in volatile contexts, the value of MEL lies not primarily in accountability reporting, but in real-time learning that enables course correction [7, 2].

6.3 Implications for Multi-Actor Partnership Design

The REcAP evaluation also surfaces important lessons for the design of multi-actor consortium partnerships in regional peacebuilding programming. The partnership between WANEP, DRC, and SIPRI was conceptually well-aligned with the programme's Theory of Change, combining civil society reach, practice-based programming expertise, and research credibility in a complementary configuration. However, early ambiguity in role division and decision authority, not formally resolved until year two of implementation, increased transaction costs and slowed delivery in the research and dissemination domains.

The evaluation's finding that efficiency was high for discrete, clearly assigned activities (training delivery, dialogue facilitation) but lower for integrated functions requiring cross-partner coordination (research-to-policy translation, digital platform governance) points to a general principle for consortium design: that clarity of authority and accountability is particularly critical at the interfaces between partners' areas of comparative advantage, where the risk of coordination gaps and diffuse responsibility is highest [9, 3]. Future programmes should invest in governance structures that preserve the quality and risk safeguards associated with multi-partner oversight, while incorporating structured follow-up mechanisms, clear decision rights at each level of the management structure, and explicit context adaptation protocols for responding to political and security shocks.

7 Conclusions

This article has argued, on the basis of empirical evidence from the REcAP evaluation and theoretical analysis informed by the broader peacebuilding evaluation literature, that the assessment of behavioural and practice-level impacts, rather than the enumeration of outputs, is the appropriate object of enquiry for evaluations of peacebuilding programming in complex contexts. Output metrics, while necessary for administrative accountability, are insufficient as measures of programme value. The most durable and transformative changes that peacebuilding investments generate occur at the level of individual and organizational behaviour: in shifts in how people facilitate dialogues, analyze conflicts, include marginalized groups, and replicate learning in their communities. Capturing these changes requires evaluation frameworks and methodologies that are up to the task.

The Capability-to-Practice (C2P) framework developed in this article offers a practical conceptual tool for understanding the conditions under which programmatic investments translate into behavioural and systemic change. The framework distinguishes between three levels of impact: output delivery, behavioural internalization, and systemic institutionalization; and identifies the enabling conditions that facilitate transitions between them. Applied to the REcAP evidence, it explains why the capacity-strengthening pathway generated the programme's most robust and durable outcomes, while research-to-policy translation and digital engagement pathways underperformed: the former was supported by enabling conditions that the programme delivered effectively, while the latter required conditions that were either under-resourced or structurally absent.

The implications for programme design and evaluation are clear. Programmes seeking to generate durable peacebuilding outcomes should design explicitly for behavioural internalization rather than assuming it will follow from output delivery; ground MEL systems in behavioural indicators and outcome harvesting methodologies capable of capturing practice-level change; resource adaptive management functions as genuine learning mechanisms rather than compliance instruments; and design ToC frameworks that are explicit about the enabling conditions required at each level of the theory, with distinct, appropriately resourced strategies for the policy influence pathways most dependent on contextual and institutional conditions beyond programme control [9, 6, 10].

The REcAP experience demonstrates that peacebuilding programming in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin can generate meaningful and credible contributions to conflict prevention and civil society strengthening, particularly through capability-led, locally anchored, and inclusively designed capacity-strengthening interventions. Realizing the full potential of these investments, however, requires evaluation frameworks equal to the task of measuring what really matters: not what was done, but what changed and why.

Declarations

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Competing Interests

The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical Approval and Accordance

This study involved human participants through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and a structured beneficiary survey (n=325) conducted across 18 countries in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin as part of the End-of-Project Evaluation of the Research and Action for Peace Network (REcAP). The evaluation was conducted by Endogen Global Consult Ltd. under the institutional oversight of the University for Development Studies (UDS), Tamale, Ghana. This study was approved by the University for Development Studies' Institutional Review Board (IRB) in accordance with the guidelines and regulations set forth in the UDS Research Ethics Policy of 2022. The protocol number for this approval is UDS/RB/107/26. As an independently commissioned programme evaluation employing a participatory, non-experimental design with no clinical or biomedical procedures, the study was assessed as falling within the scope of standard social-research ethics protocols that do not require full institutional review board (IRB) approval under the UDS Research Ethics Policy. All data collection was governed by the following ethical principles, consistent with the guidelines of the UDS Research Ethics Committee and the OECD/DAC Evaluation Quality Standards: (1) all participants were provided with full information about the purposes, methods, and intended use of the evaluation prior to participation and gave their voluntary informed consent before engaging in any data collection activity; (2) the identities of all informants were anonymized at the point of transcription and no personally identifying information appears in this manuscript or in any underlying data files; (3) sensitivity protocols were applied during data collection in politically restricted and conflict-affected contexts, including the Sahel sub-region, to protect participants from any risk of harm arising from their participation; and (4) data were stored securely and are available only to the author and the commissioning organization. No incentives or inducements were offered to participants. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

Author Contribution declaration

I confirm sole responsibility for all aspects of this work. I, Joseph Abazaami contributed to the conception and design of the study; data collection; data analysis and interpretation; drafting of the manuscript; critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content; and approval of the final version for submission. I also agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Data Availability

The data underlying this study are not publicly available due to ethical and confidentiality considerations but may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and approval from WANEP and Consortium partners and Endogen Global Consult Ltd.

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