Guiding Principles for Learning and Evaluation at Global Fund for Children

Learning is an integral part of community-driven systems change led by children, youth, and their communities. We understand that Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) processes traditionally hold a lot of power, and we believe that bringing a more democratic, trust-based approach to MEL is an essential step in shifting the power back to the organizations we work with and their communities. Historically, funders have often been the ones defining how the success of an initiative is measured. They establish predetermined outcomes, require extensive reporting, and drive learning agendas. This approach perpetuates one-way accountability to the donor, reinforces unhealthy power dynamics, and precludes the establishment of trusting relationships between funders, grassroots organizations, evaluators, and communities. We believe that it is critical to listen to our partners and give them a voice in the MEL process so that we can define meaningful change together.

Tracking and examining our progress and impact as an organization is an essential element of GFC's history and evolution. In the past, we conveyed the success of our work through a narrow set of key indicators, such as the number of grassroots partners we served and the number of children our partners were able to reach. While those metrics remain relevant, in recent years we have started moving away from defining our success exclusively through these indicators, finding that many stories of change cannot be told solely through *numbers served*.

Creating trust-based relationships can be challenging in a sector in which funders have historically dictated requirements. GFC is part of a growing effort in philanthropy to shift power to communities, and we subscribe to the idea that relying solely on traditional MEL approaches does not reflect the broader picture of long-term social change. Traditional approaches imply a linear relationship between inputs, outcomes, and trajectories of change, which is rarely how complex systemic change occurs at the community level.

Listening to and being accountable to our partners

Listening to our partners is a key element of our approach to learning and to assessing our impact. We look to our partners' experiences to influence how we set priorities and define future strategies and visions. We recognize that our partners are closest to the work and have the wisdom and lived experience to collaborate with communities to address issues in a holistic way. Beyond holding ourselves accountable to our donors, we have a deep responsibility to the organizations we work with to listen to and act on their feedback. This accountability impacts the way we work with partners on reporting. A common grievance voiced by nongovernmental organizations in the sector is that funders set unrealistic reporting requirements that take a lot of time and resources to complete. At GFC, we try to minimize the reporting burden on our partners by asking as few questions as possible, only collecting data we know we will use, and offering alternative ways to submit information besides written reports.

Fostering collaborative experimentation

GFC works on [many initiatives](#) with our partners across various thematic areas, and this breadth allows us to examine our impact more broadly. We don't take a one-size-fits-all approach to the learning and evaluation frameworks for these initiatives. Instead, we tailor each initiative's framework to the needs of the initiative and our partners. We experiment with co-designed learning activities, identify ways for partners to define how they measure success, and help weave common threads of insights across our partners' work. Our aim in the design process is to capture collaborative learnings, strengthen our partners' capacity to better support the children and young people with whom they work, and help partners expand their networks. We are continually trying out new ways of fostering the participation of partners and young people in our learning and evaluation work, and we are hoping to further expand these efforts in the future.

Allowing time for change to occur

When examining our impact, we recognize that our approach requires a long-term, nuanced view of change. Systems change takes longer to achieve than a typical funding cycle. It requires long-term investment, patience, and the flexibility to make mistakes. While tangible change may be slow to occur, sustaining localized changes at the community level can have a powerful impact on society.

Making space for flexible and adaptive learning

Learning and evaluation within a community-driven systems change approach requires flexibility and adaptability. Rigid MEL systems – which are often used for accountability purposes to prove to donors that their financial investment was "worth it" – can be extractive. While designing learning frameworks is important, it is also important to leave room for adjustments. Our trust-based relationships and frequent interactions with partners allow us to seek their feedback earlier in the relationship, which helps us figure out what is working and what is not. This enables us to work with our partners to adjust the focus of the initiative and the learning framework toward more meaningful goals. Regular feedback and iteration loops, enhanced by our flexible-funding approach, strengthen our learning and help us identify improvements so we can more quickly make adjustments.

Focusing on data that matters to catalyze action

We are intentional about focusing on the data that truly matters. As much as possible, we want our partners to tell us what evidence is important and should be collected, reported, and acted upon. We are intentional in engaging our partners in decisions around learning and evaluation, and we want the evidence we produce together to be useful for them beyond their relationship with us. The evaluation field has been extractive for far too long, and it is our fundamental belief that giving the agency back to grassroots partners creates more resilient and confident communities.

Incorporating capacity development into learning

Our approach to learning focuses as much on the process as the results. One of our goals is to help our partners grow stronger and develop new skills, and we find ways to use evaluation to strengthen capacity. If partners participate in a learning review or evaluation, we may also invite them to join a workshop so

they can learn to apply some of the same methodologies with their teams, program participants, or communities. We see value in creating learning opportunities wherever possible, as this approach gives partners more ownership over learning processes. It also allows us to learn about new techniques from our partners.