USAID META-EVALUATION OF GRAND CHALLENGES KNOWLEDGE PRODUCT

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING IN GRAND CHALLENGES FOR DEVELOPMENT

Photo: Global Devlab/USAID

USAID's meta-evaluation of the Grand Challenges for Development (GCs) was commissioned to enable systematic reflection on ten years of experience and to generate an actionable evidence base to build future programming. One area of enquiry for the meta-evaluation was how impact and results had been measured. This briefing paper sets out key learning, practical tips and recommendations for those both inside and outside of USAID who manage GCs.

GCs are programs that mobilize governments, companies, and foundations around specific developmental or humanitarian challenges. Through these programs, USAID and public and private partners bring in new voices to solve developmental problems. GCs source new solutions, test new ideas, and scale what works by awarding grants and using additional tools to provide targeted technical assistance support to a wide variety of actors from many countries. The creation of GCs signaled a shift away from large bilateral and multilateral agencies, aid organizations and private voluntary organizations and towards non-traditional actors such as the private sector, civil society organizations, academic institutions and local partners.

GCs harness new technologies and collaborative partnerships in support of entrepreneurship, collective problem solving and new approaches.[1] They enable USAID to foster innovative solutions by mobilizing its convening power to leverage funds and resources of other agencies, testing a range of solutions to identify those with highest potential to succeed at scale, supporting commercialization, operating with a higher tolerance for risk, enabling flexible use of funds through milestone-based funding mechanisms, and supporting different stages of innovation.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING (MEL) FOR GCs?
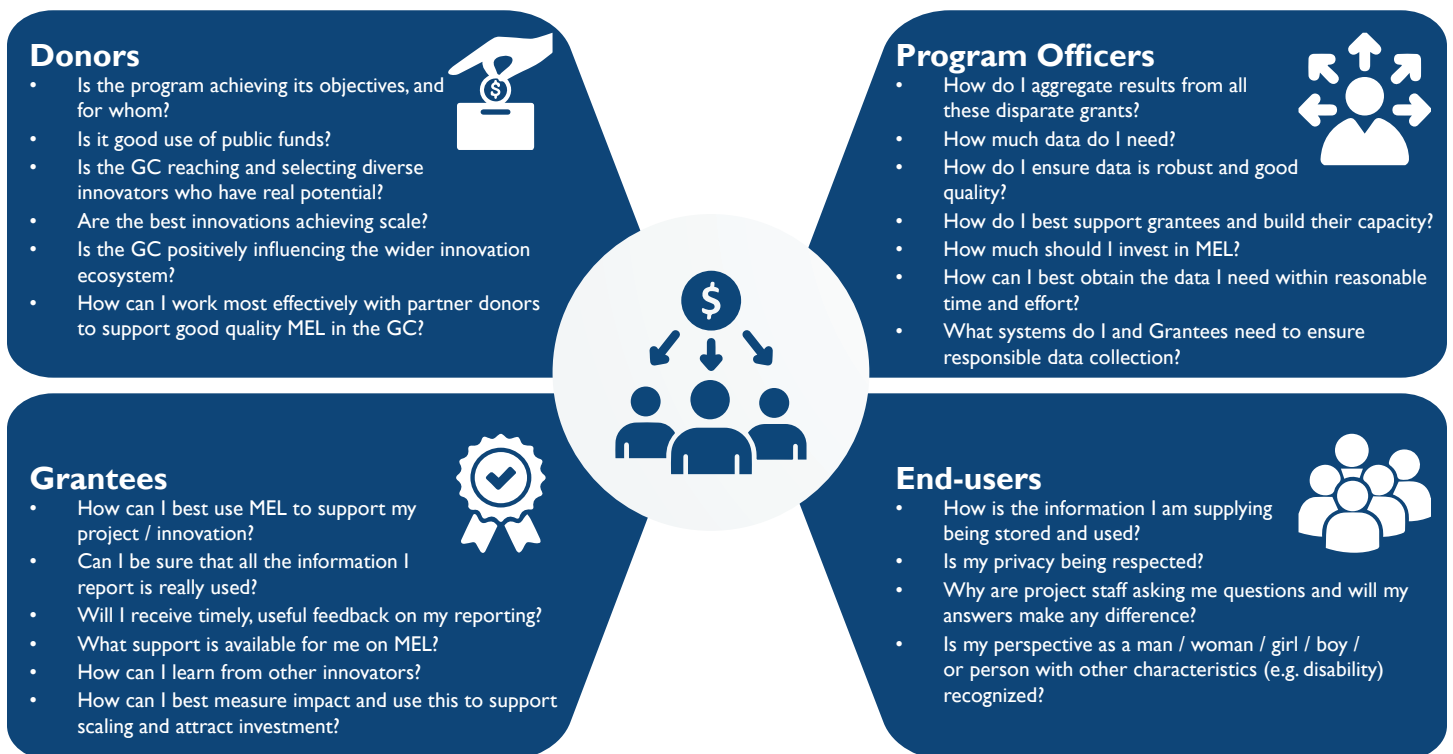
Sound monitoring, evaluation and learning is vital to any aid program if it is to demonstrate results and learn from both successes and failures. MEL on GCs must additionally collect evidence and learn not only about the innovative solutions being tested and developed - their effectiveness, reach, potential market and scope for improvement - but also about implementation of the GC model itself and the achievements of the GC as a whole.

MEL is a particular challenge for GCs given the experimental and evolving nature of the approach and the wide range of development challenges they address. Even within a single thematic focus, GCs make many grants to a range of diverse projects in different geographies; projects are often implemented by actors unfamiliar with development terminology and expectations, including MEL systems; innovation is not linear and results might be unpredictable; and GCs often have several partner donors with different expectations for reporting.

WHOSE PERSPECTIVES ON MEL MATTERS?

Many different actors are involved in GC implementation. Data collection for the GC meta-evaluation showed that these actors and the intended end-users of the innovations developed by GCs have different perspectives on MEL for GCs. These perspectives are illustrated below. All of them can usefully guide how MEL is structured and implemented by GCs.

Figure1: Stakeholder Perspectives on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning in GCs

Donors
- Is the program achieving its objectives, and for whom?
- Is it good use of public funds?
- Is the GC reaching and selecting diverse innovators who have real potential?
- Are the best innovations achieving scale?
- Is the GC positively influencing the wider innovation ecosystem?
- How can I work most effectively with partner donors to support good quality MEL in the GC?

Program Officers
- How do I aggregate results from all these disparate grants?
- How much data do I need?
- How do I ensure data is robust and good quality?
- How do I best support grantees and build their capacity?
- How much should I invest in MEL?
- How can I best obtain the data I need within reasonable time and effort?
- What systems do I and Grantees need to ensure responsible data collection?

Grantees
- How can I best use MEL to support my project / innovation?
- Can I be sure that all the information I report is really used?
- Will I receive timely, useful feedback on my reporting?
- What support is available for me on MEL?
- How can I learn from other innovators?
- How can I best measure impact and use this to support scaling and attract investment?

End-users
- How is the information I am supplying being stored and used?
- Is my privacy being respected?
- Why are project staff asking me questions and will my answers make any difference?
- Is my perspective as a man / woman / girl / boy / or person with other characteristics (e.g. disability) recognized?

[1] The context of GC's introduction is outlined in the opening section of the GC meta-evaluation report:

MEL: What Worked Well?

Clear GC frameworks for understanding how change is expected to occur and capturing results A strong theory of change and an overarching MEL Plan or results framework which is clearly aligned to it provides clarity about the objectives of the GC and how success is to be measured. This is done well through clearly defined expected outcomes and outputs which set out what results are expected, by when and for whom.

Creating Hope in Conflict provides an example of a strong results framework. It sets out clear indicators at all levels (impact, outcome and output) and has a well-defined focus on the ultimate beneficiary population (men and women in humanitarian need due to conflict) and on the aim of the program (lives saved, lives improved). Indicators are disaggregated by age and gender and end-users are described (e.g. humanitarian actors or people in conflict).

Visibility of different end-users or beneficiaries In some GCs, disaggregation of both targets and reporting meant that results for women and other disadvantaged groups were visible. This is important for understanding the developmental impact of a GC, in terms of gender equality and social inclusion.

Learning so that innovations can adapt, improve and scale – or end Some GCs used monitoring data and learning to strengthen their programming, not just for upward reporting and accountability purposes. Creating Hope in Conflict specifically asked its grantees to report on learning from innovations which had not succeeded Securing Water for Food used performance data and a clear end objective to decide which innovations to continue supporting and how, and which to stop.

MEL support for grantees and MEL strengthening 87 percent of grantees had received some MEL support from the GC manager. For awardees of All Children Reading: A Grand Challenge for Development support included advice on standardizing tools and data collection practices from a MEL partner, which was valued. Many GC and project-level evaluations provided good learning. Securing Water for Food conducted detailed results verification studies as well as case studies through their Field Evaluation Program to supplement grantee level MEL.

> *The reporting kept us up to date with the project progress, performance and successes/failures – which allowed us to make remedial changes quickly before things became worse. It allowed us to continually interface with our beneficiaries / customers and learn their interests in respect to innovation design ... and thus enable us to make design and setup adjustments*
>
> **Grantee**
> *Securing Water for Food*

CASE STUDY FROM ALL CHILDREN READING: A GRAND CHALLENGE FOR DEVELOPMENT

eKitabu, a three-time awardee of ACR GCD, has developed storybooks for literacy and has brought digital content to more than 1,500 schools across Kenya and in 13 African countries. Many of their products are designed for deaf children and those with learning difficulties. eKitabu described their performance-based milestone MEL approach as very effective at keeping their projects on track and increasing the productivity of the company and said that putting impact and learning at the center of implementation aided scaling up more than anything.

Little Thinking Minds, a grantee of ACR GCD from Jordan, collaborated with a specialist MEL organization based in the Middle East to develop a child-centred Arabic reading and learning platform. This collaboration strengthened the project portfolio by bringing diverse and informed perspectives and added to the project's research rigor. By evaluating literacy, testing and pedagogy, particularly for Syrian refugee children, the innovative platform could be better designed to meet the challenges children face in acquiring literacy in Arabic. Further, data and evidence generated on the use, effectiveness and impact of the technology at the student level was a key to its development and wider expansion.

HOW MIGHT MEL IN GCs BE STRENGTHENED IN THE FUTURE?

Demonstrate results across GC grant portfolios In several GCs, grantees developed MEL plans and had targets, which was positive, but results were not aggregated in an over arching MEL plan for the GC. There were many reasons for this including the diverse progress indicators chosen, different ways of measuring progress, or an unwillingness to impose additional reporting requirements. This meant that while results might be apparent for individual grantees, the GC as a whole could not easily demonstrate its achievements.

Make different end-users visible Several GCs described the end-users or beneficiaries of their grants as "people", "communities" or "innovators", without differentiating between male and female, boys and girls, young men and young women, able-bodied or not. Only 28 percent of grantees had received training on collecting and presenting results by gender, age or disability. The risk is that by not knowing who benefits from GC projects, innovations perpetuate disadvantage and reduce their potential for developmental impact.

Tell the longer term story of GC and innovation impact Informal arrangements were in place in some GCs, but none had formal systems for data collection and reporting on the long-term outcomes and sustainability of innovations after GC support had ended. This situation is commonplace in aid programs but, alongside loss of institutional home and memory within USAID when a GC ends, means that the legacy of GCs and the innovations they funded is largely unknown.

Measure how GCs have strengthened ecosystems Most GCs undertake activities to create a stronger ecosystem (i.e., the context of organizations, markets, policy environment and key actors) to support innovation. They also seek to achieve system-level change (e.g., to a country's health system) through the innovations they fund. Measurement of ecosystem strengthening is limited to the amount of external funding leveraged by the challenge and wider effects are not measured and tracked.

RECOMMENDATIONS: TOWARDS A ROBUST APPROACH TO MEL FOR GCs

- GCs would benefit from a set of overarching principles and approaches for MEL which sets out clear expectations and practical guidance for GCs to apply to their own particular program, taking into account the different perspectives on and uses of MEL. This guidance could be developed by a centralized MEL team, who also provide advice on MEL implementation across GCs.

- GCs should develop clear objectives, performance indicators, monitoring systems and an evaluation approach for the GC as a whole, and support innovators to do likewise, to strengthen projects and enable project results to be aggregated to give portfolio level results.

- USAID could consider establishing a set of standard indicators to aid aggregation of results, for example in relation to end users reached (male/female), ecosystem strengthening, cost effectiveness, innovation scaling and catalytic effects (e.g., funds leveraged).

- GC objectives and MEL systems should make gender and other characteristics of exclusion visible, defining terms used and collecting and reporting data accordingly.

- GCs and projects should undertake structured learning and use this and monitoring data for adaptation and improvement, keeping reporting requirements proportionate.

- GCs should have experienced, dedicated and sufficiently resourced MEL teams who can develop MEL systems and build the capacity of grantees.

Securing Water for Food measured benefits from innovations, including improvement in income resulting from innovation use, for both women and poor people. Monitoring data revealed that these groups were benefitting less than all respondents as a whole, which would not otherwise have been apparent.

Photo: Global Devlab/USAID