Monitoring, Evaluation, & Learning Hurdles and Helpers

Learnings from the Fiscal Governance, Economic Justice, & Social Justice fields

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About the Fiscal Governance Indicators Project

Starting in 2019, Results for Development (R4D), with support from Open Society Foundations, undertook an initiative designed to contribute to the improvement of measurement in the field of governance, including in areas such as anti-corruption, extractives transparency, and fiscal transparency. After undertaking extensive formative research, we mapped existing indicators and tools (including their strengths and weaknesses) and priority measurement needs according to feedback from monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) leaders in fiscal governance. Phase 1 of the Fiscal Governance Indicators project (2019-2020) resulted in the development of the Measuring Governance, Advocacy, and Power database as well as three new toolkits designed to help organizations measure: (1) civil society ecosystem strength; (2) government capacity, incentives, relationships, and influence; and (3) reach and response of messaging and advocacy campaigns (publication forthcoming). This learning brief is the first product from phase 2 of the project.

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Introduction and Methods

Phase 1 of the Fiscal Governance Indicators project focused explicitly on unpacking and filling gaps in how organizations measure change and outcomes for fiscal governance and economic justice.

While there remain gaps in measures, indicators, and tools to assess progress, a significant learning from Phase 1 of the initiative was that even existing robust and usable tools and resources are often not used widely by organizations working on fiscal governance, human rights, and social justice. Without uptake, any development of new tools will fail to improve the learning and progress necessary in these critical fields.

To address this obstacles, we began Phase 2 of the project seeking to strengthen our understanding of the barriers to MEL uptake and implementation among fiscal governance, human rights, and social justice actors. This learning brief presents our findings from this research.

Methods

In our research, we sought to understand what practitioners and the literature say about:

- Core challenges to MEL implementation and uptake in the fiscal governance and social justice fields;
- Tested and effective strategies to address or mitigate these challenges; and,
- How these barriers and strategies were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our research involved 10 key informant interviews with MEL practitioners, supplemented by a review of the academic and grey literature. Interview transcripts were analyzed for themes related to MEL challenges and strategies, and the literature was reviewed to identify evidence to support or contradict themes shared by informants.

Putting these learnings about organizational MEL into context

One important thing to note while reviewing these findings is that many of the challenges and strategies discussed in this brief focus on the MEL issues that show up for practitioners on a day-to-day basis – rather than the structural root causes and drivers of these MEL issues.

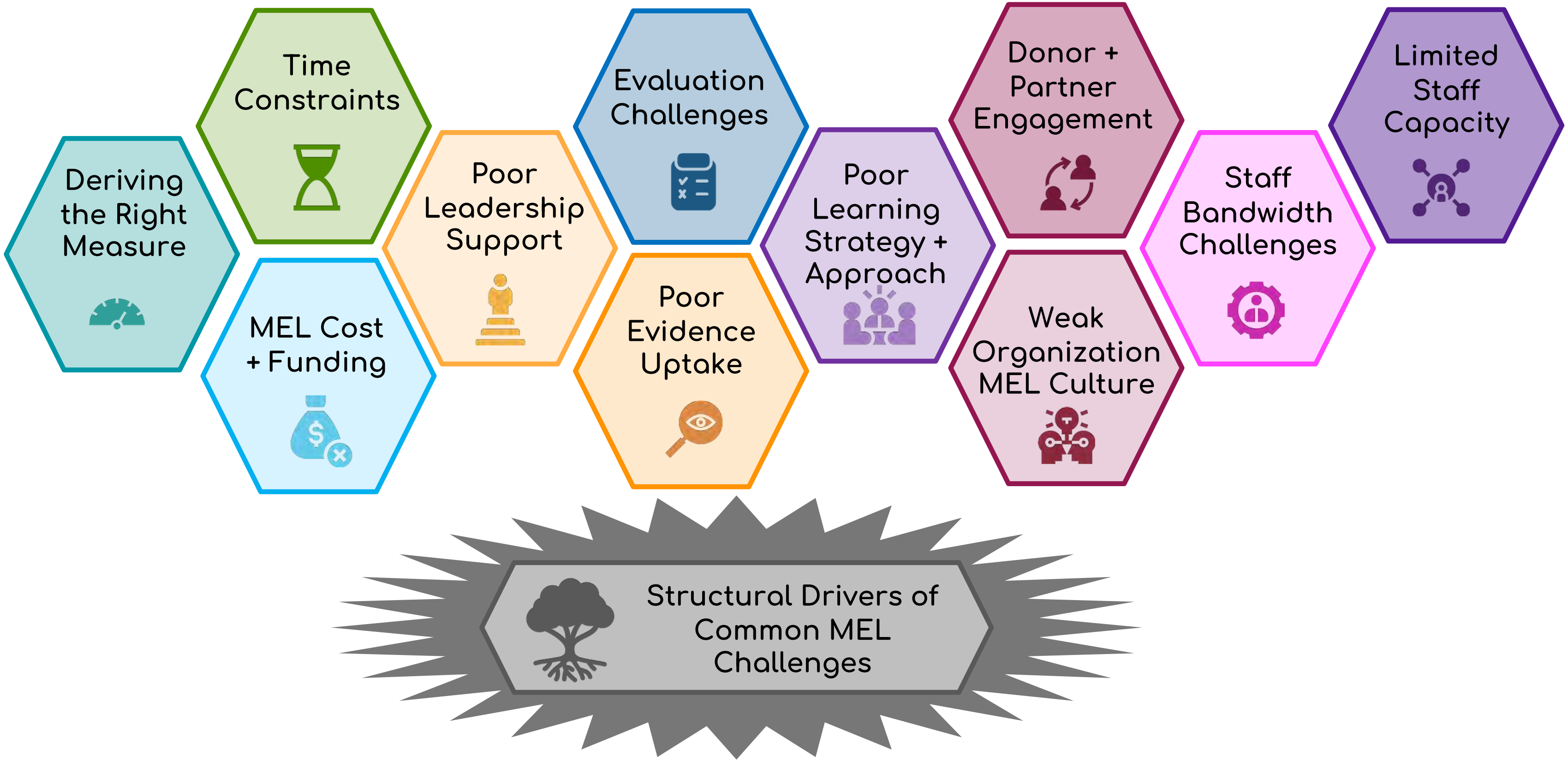
Designing and implementing MEL in the fields of fiscal governance and social justice is inherently complex, from the embedded assumptions that underlie our work to the dynamic contexts in which our programs take place to the historic (if evolving) concerns from implementers that the work we are trying to do just can't be measured.

These deeper obstacles present themselves in many ways, and the challenges in this brief are largely symptoms of these structural issues. However, we believe that, while only addressing these symptoms is not enough, resolving some of these challenges can still be an important stepping stone on the journey to getting at the more foundational issues.

Later in the brief, we dedicate one sub-section to the Structural Drivers of MEL challenges; this discussion is only an introduction, but we do seek to present some questions that are important to consider in moving from strategies for addressing everyday MEL challenges to changing the way we think about MEL holistically and structurally to improve fiscal governance and social justice outcomes.

MEL Challenges & Strategies

MEL CHALLENGES



MEL CHALLENGE 1: Deriving the right measure

The Fiscal Governance Indicators project began by focusing on one specific challenge and (in fact) this specific challenge – how can we measure the "hard to measure" in fiscal governance and social justice. Our recent formative research revealed that this remains a challenge for MEL in these sectors, if not the only or the biggest challenge.

On the next page, we highlight several measurement challenges that informants and the literature agree need to be addressed to improve how we measure progress. However, we want to begin with a larger challenge: the need to get better at MEL for systems change. While this is not a challenge that is unique to the fiscal governance and social justice fields, it is one that disproportionately affects the ability of practitioners who are tackling these complex problems to assess how well their work is going.

For MEL teams and practitioners grappling with the challenge of how to measure systems change, we recommend these actionable resources for integrating a systems lens into the way we measure progress:

- Søren Vester Haldrup's "Innovative M&E from the Sandbox and Beyond" (UNDP Innovation blog, January 2023)
- Donna Loveridge's "Systems change frameworks" (Personal Medium, November 2022)
- Springfield Centre's "A pragmatic approach to measuring systems change" (Springfield Centre website, October 2020)

MEL CHALLENGE 1: Deriving the right measure

Additional challenges associated with deriving the right measure include:

- **Right-fit measures do not pacify skeptics**: One of the most common measurement challenges cited by informants is in finding “rigorous enough” indicators. While qualitative indicators or measures collected using purposive sampling may be the right fit for the outcomes that an organization is seeking to measure, they may receive pushback from other organizations or donors regarding whether these indicators are high-quality and rigorous enough to be considered valid measures of their work.

- **The challenge of finding meaningful indicators**: For organizations that work on complex issues such as improving accountability or strengthening civic space, finding an indicator or set of indicators that both share useful information and are feasible to collect can be a daunting task.

- **The challenge of finding tools that match the right indicators**: Even when organizations are able to identify good indicators, the tools and methods needed to collect data for the indicator can present obstacles. Several informants cited that the time and resources needed to report on an indicator is a barrier to actually measuring progress.

“When one team shares measures of their work, the feedback from everyone else is that these are vanity metrics. People are very critical.”

“So in general, we don’t use many indicators in the work. We have used them for partners' work but we have seen a ton of challenges with making those indicators meaningful.”

- **Focus on measuring progress over time, not just the big changes**: While progress measures may not pacify skeptics, being able to assess progress is critical to the work of fiscal governance- and social justice-focused organizations. In fields where progress is rarely linear and outcomes are dynamic, informants highlighted that measuring their changes toward outcomes is often more valuable than only focusing on whether an ultimate objective is achieved.

- **Sharing simple tools across organizations**: For many organizations, they are seeking to make progress in similar areas of work, such as combating corruption or influencing policy. While organizations are often left to craft solutions to their measurement challenges on their own, we heard from several people who had developed simple tools to measure progress that could be adapted and adopted by other practitioners working in this sector. Sharing tools like the ones listed below is a strategy that could help the wider field get better at measurement:
    - Influence trackers
    - Conversation and engagement logs
    - Reach, response, and use trackers
    - Stoplight approach to assessing progress

"So it is this understanding of how we measure the changes, doing this in stages instead of waiting for the final picture. We measure changes over time. So if bigger picture happens, that is great, but if not, we have learned something. Policy changes are high level. So from time a project is conceptualized to its end, so many changes happen – behaviors of actors, relationships, changes in software. But for us the focus is hardware, and this is discouraging to work for 4 years, waiting for a policy change that does not happen. We miss out on other changes happening along the way. And even when changes happen at a policy level, it may not translate to grassroots changes. We need to go down and see if policies translate to changes on the ground. And this sector is missing this now. The focus is up there at the top - it is making sure contracts are disclosed. But once this happens, so what. So we need mechanisms to understand trickle down effects."

Strategies for Deriving the right measure

What the literature says: Both the academic literature and grey literature highlight helpful strategies for measurement challenges in fiscal governance and social justice, including:

- Better ways to assess the quality of measurements and evidence (Altshuler 2022)
- The value of looking across sectors for measures and indicators that may be relevant outside of a sector silo (Ali et al. 2020)
- Breaking down complex outcomes into components can help make measurement feasible (Kaufmann 2021)
- Some specific insights and recommendations for organizations that are seeking to measure the outcomes of their advocacy (from Arensmen 2020 and Chapman & Wameyo 2001)
- And some specific recommendations and lessons about measuring corruption at all levels (Kukutschka 2016)

"I define "quality evidence" as information that will improve real-world outcomes. Quality is not just about data quality and methodological rigor but also relevance and timeliness. Rigorous evidence delivered too late means missed opportunities to improve people's lives. At the same time, we must be honest about methodological limitations when making tradeoffs between speed, rigor, and relevance."

\- Altshuler 2022

MEL CHALLENGE 2: Time Constraints

"I can tell you even now – we collect data every quarter, but we collect so much that it takes 2-3 weeks to analyze it and make sense of it and then feed it back to teams. Sometimes we hear 'this is interesting, but we made that decision 2 months ago.'"

- **Getting learning for programmatic development takes time**: MEL managers often struggle with the timeline they have to analyze data and use the learning for programmatic development. Programs may have ended before learnings from the previous project are identified.
- **Sensitizing external evaluators also takes time:** Further, when organizations make use of external evaluators to support the MEL team in conducting external evaluations, it is time consuming for staff to help external evaluators understand the project(s) as well as to align the internal organization goals with those of the external evaluators. This can be a tedious process, and many MEL teams do not have the luxury of time to consistently work with external evaluators in ensuring the internal MEL goals are being achieved.
- **Staff overburdened with additional MEL responsibilities**: There is a related challenge of not having enough staff for MEL activities. Organizations may have a MEL staff member or small team to support this part of the work, but often MEL responsibilities fall on program teams. This can lead to frustration with MEL responsibilities, as program staff may consider MEL activities as an extra task that does not add value to their work and thus may not always be prioritized or completed.
- **Difficulty in scheduling meetings with staff and partners**: There is often a challenge with scheduling learning sessions with partners. This is linked to the fact that staff are usually overburdened with various tasks and don't have enough time to reflect on the learnings with partners. In the long run for various projects, there is usually no follow up/action review conducted.

Strategies for Time Constraints for MEL

- **Developing simple MEL templates**: Not all MEL activities can be simplified into easy-to-use templates; however, many respondents cited tools that they were able to develop that made monitoring and data collection easier for staff to undertake. Once these were introduced to and socialized with staff, many complaints about time and lack of clarity regarding data collection were mitigated.
- **Reducing data collection**: A few interviewees noted that they went through an internal data audit of their indicators and monitoring, and they were able to reduce the burden on staff by removing data that was interesting but often not useful to staff.
- **Leveraging external learning and MEL partners**: For small teams that do not have capacity and/or time to do necessary MEL activities, respondents highlighted roles that they carved out for external MEL partners or consultants, including: learning partner to facilitate evidence-based learning and reflection sessions and partners to lead data collection and analysis for key activities.
- **Automating as much as possible**: Using data collection platforms and other systems can take pressure and burden off of team members to remember when they need to collect or input data.

"One simple tool we have used is a template around reach, response, and use for advocacy work: who has received our work, how have they engaged, accepted or disputed it or have they engaged in dialogue with us around it or have they just gone off and we don't know what happened – how do we see it put into practice, directly or indirectly."

"In order to see how we are achieving those targets, we have developed 4-5 main tools. One is a conversation log to capture conversations we are having with each other and partners. Another is an influence tracker that looks at high-level key messages from different policy influencers as well as diff publications and outputs from others in the field and seeing what influence we are seeing from our work. The other tool is an activity and output tracker. The final tool we use regularly is stakeholder map where we map out stakeholders and policy influencers we want to work with, learn more about ad influence with our advocacy."

MEL CHALLENGE 3: MEL Cost + Funding

- **Lack of budget(ing) for MEL activities**: When it comes to funding for MEL, MEL managers are faced with the challenge of budget. For some projects, there may not be adequate resources in the budget to cover the cost of an evaluation, especially an externally-led one. In other cases, project budgets are determined without consultation with MEL managers, and so opportunities are lost to build MEL activities into a budget that could have otherwise supported evaluation and learning.

- **Donor restrictions on MEL spending**: Due to internal policies and constraints and/or a lack of value placed on MEL, funders may limit the scope of MEL activities (and thus budget allowed for MEL) to cover only the aspects of MEL most important to them. When this occurs, important MEL activities as well as staff time to undertake MEL may need to be excluded from project budgets.

- **Unrealistic expectations regarding the cost of MEL**: While not all MEL activities need to be expensive, project leads and organization leaders may not have adequate understanding of the costs associated with evaluations or learning activities, leading to under-resourcing from project or core budgets.

"Funders are so interested in knowing about the impact and they preach so much about M&E and importance of it and how orgs should be carrying it out but they are not necessarily providing the funds for it"

MEL CHALLENGE 3: MEL Cost + Funding

- **Limited funding set aside at an organizational level for MEL activities and priorities**: MEL managers face the challenge of limited funding for MEL activities within organization and project budgets. This may occur because MEL is not considered as priority, and thus not budgeted for during proposals. Even in situations where MEL is budgeted, the level of funding may not be enough due to competing priorities for funding. This lack of funding may lead MEL teams to compromise on undertaking evaluations or other data collection.

- **Well-resourced evaluations may not provide "best results," making it challenging to secure funds in future**: Organizations that do choose to provide ample resources to MEL activities (such as large-scale evaluations) are sometimes disappointed by the results, either because they do not show the desired outcomes or the engagement with evaluators is not productive or satisfactory. Informants noted that, in these situations, the ultimate result can be that leadership devotes fewer resources to MEL in the future because they do not see the value based on past experiences.

"We haven't ever had unlimited resources on our MEL team, and in fact they have been increasingly modest as budgets are tight overall. But the funny thing is that the most well-resourced MEL thing we have done was in many ways one of the more challenging ones; ultimately we scaled back and stepped away from that activity because there were just too many contradictions in interpretations understanding around it. So in some ways, the fact it had more resources attached to it made it more of a lightning rod."

Strategies for MEL Cost + Funding

- **Training staff on proper MEL budgeting**: Informants noted that sometimes MEL funding constraints stem from improper budgeting at the proposal stage of a project. Several respondents noted that they and others on the MEL team sought to work more closely with program teams to help them better estimate the cost of MEL for the learning and evaluation goals of projects, which led to more realistic budgets set aside for MEL activities.
- **Developing simple tools to reduce costs**: While it is not always possible to reduce the costs of data collection, some informants have developed simple tools for monitoring and learning that avoid higher-cost resources such as external consultants and software for analysis. These tools, when used for the appropriate MEL tasks, have the added bonus of making MEL easier and less burdensome for their own teams and program teams alike.
- **Get honest and creative in developing MEL options within the budget**: Big rigorous evaluations may not always be feasible in a project or organization budget, and one of the best things that an organization can do is to be honest and realistic about the funding they have. At the same time, not all MEL needs to be costly; our informants recommend that project and MEL teams develop contingencies or options for different MEL approaches they could take, including evaluations that may require additional funds and learning and reflections sessions that are not resource-intensive. Building these contingencies at the start of a project lifecycle increases the chances that MEL is right-sized to the resources available – and that some type of evidence and learning is actually carried out.

MEL CHALLENGE 4: Poor Leadership Support

Leadership plays an important role in the adoption and effectiveness of MEL in an organization; however, civil society organizations face various challenges that affect the level of support they ought to receive from their leadership:

- **Challenges with leadership decision-making and/or support for MEL**: From providing an enabling environment to conduct MEL, to being part of creating a MEL strategy, often MEL is affected by the poor and inconsistent decision making process in civil society organizations. There is also a challenge of getting leaders to make decisions at the right time for MEL activities, which has always affected the effectiveness of MEL activities.

- **Leadership transitions**: The delay in replacing certain leadership roles and responsibilities affects the level of support to carry out MEL activities. This also includes replacing key MEL roles in the organizations. When this is delayed/slow, conducting MEL activities successfully in the organization will be a challenge. This is often a challenge because decision making is a vital part of MEL in any organization, therefore without leadership, progress towards certain MEL activities or adopting some MEL strategies will be stalled.

What the literature says: Studies in the literature on organizational learning highlight this challenge, with work from Gray and Carl (2022) and Milway and Saxton (2011) recognizing supportive leadership as one of several key necessary elements for a strong learning culture. Learning briefs from organizations like the International Budget Partnership identify the importance of MEL staff representation in leadership as a critical success factor for MEL to work.

“Our ED left in March and replacement has not started yet and also our director of strategy and learning was on maternity leave for first few months of year, so we are being very stretched as a small organization with a lot of transition.”

Strategies for Leadership Support for MEL

MEL teams within economic and social justice-focused organizations highlighted several strategies that they recommend to help ensure leadership support of MEL:

- **Finding and fostering MEL champions**: While some organizations have an executive director that is supportive of MEL, this is not always the case. Respondents highlighted that they were sometimes able to overcome this challenge by identifying a different champion* in the executive or management team who could serve as an internal champion for their work. Alternatively, some interviewees shared that they undertook activities to foster leadership support of MEL, engaging in "pause and reflect" discussions with their executive teams, creating impact and progress cases that showed the value of MEL to staff who are engaging with donors and stakeholders, and making "internal advocacy for MEL" part of their jobs and performance measures.

- **Working with leadership to signal MEL importance**: Even when organization leaders support MEL, it is critical that this support is seen across all levels of the organization. Respondents stated that they had success in working with leaders in their organizations to share MEL stories during staff meetings and to share other signals that MEL support starts from the top of the organization.

"Our ED is very acquainted to MEL. It helps a lot when you have management who understand MEL, it saves a lot of time. So our ED helped me a lot in creating that environment. For instance, many times our ED sends reminders to colleagues to fill in things; it is my job to do so, but he pushes which says a lot."

* We define a "Champion" as an individual who can advocate for the importance or uptake of MEL, even if not a MEL team member.

MEL CHALLENGE 5: Evaluation Challenges

- **Internal evaluations seen as biased**: For organizations that conduct regular internal evaluations, they may face the obstacle of partners or donors questioning the authenticity of these evaluations. In addition to preconceived notions about what methodologies are sufficiently rigorous (discussed earlier), stakeholders may raise concerns about any evaluation led by an organization's MEL team, even if the MEL team operates independently of program teams.

- **Tensions between program teams and external evaluators**: When working with external evaluators or partners, several obstacles have the potential to arise. Program teams and evaluators may have different perspectives regarding the right type of evaluation methods, expectations for staff and partners related to data collections, and objectives of the evaluation. Several informants noted that MEL team members are often left to mediate these conflicts and that they are not always able to align the expectations and the needs of both the evaluator(s) and the program staff.

"Evaluation is a science in and of itself. Sometimes there is a bias that comes with evaluating one's own work."

"The external evaluations are trickier; the findings and the interactions with evaluators are a bit trickier to manage and make sure that evaluators are getting what they need and staff is paying attention. So that part is a huge time suck for our team. It takes a long time for an organization like ours to explain what we do to evaluators; it is a steep learning curve"

- **Be strategic in the use of resources for big external evaluations versus small internal evaluations**: While external resource-intensive evaluations can be critical to answer key learning questions, informants also highlighted learning questions that they could answer using smaller internal evaluations and/or evaluative thinking practices. By mapping out learning questions annually and designing less-costly evaluative approaches for those questions that do not require externally-led research, organizations could more efficiently use the resources they have for MEL.
- **Build midline learning moments into large evaluation**: Informants also noted that they were able to use data collected for larger evaluations to reflect and learn even before endline results were shared. These learning moments helped organizations adapt in real-time while also helping program teams see the value that evaluations could have in the design of their work. It is worth noting that one informant did highlight that this strategy works best when it is integrated into the evaluation design from the beginning of the process.

What the literature says: The literature has an array of useful insights regarding choosing and designing the right method (Baylor et al. 2019, Fischer and Stein 2021, and David-Berrett et al. 2020) and planning in advance for the challenges of managing evaluations (Carugi and Bryant 2020).

"We are in the final six months of a 3-year program, and we brought an evaluation team on at the beginning of the year. They have helped shape and refine some of our monitoring instruments we are using this year, and these will generate data they will use in the evaluation. Just last week, we used the preliminary data for the evaluation to do an internal reflection on what we have seen at the start of the year to inform implementation for the rest of the year. So, we see this as integrated, complementary, and mutually reinforcing."

MEL CHALLENGE 6: Poor uptake of evidence

- **Translating interest in MEL findings to action**: While program teams may be interested in the findings that monitoring and evaluations produce, informants noted that this interest does not always result in adaptation and changes in programs that reflect these findings. Results may be shared in such a way that it is more theoretical and less action-oriented, or the results may suggest changes that are not feasible within a program's or organization's budget, resources, or timeline. Presenting MEL findings that are not actionable may also lower staff's interest in future MEL activities, as they see evaluation and learning as an activity that does not help them improve their work.

- **Timing of MEL findings may not align with decision points**: Even when MEL findings are actionable, they may come too late in a project lifecycle to be useful in decision-making. When results are shared at the endline of a project or even after it is completed, informants noted that program teams may feel like MEL is only focused on accountability (whether they did something "right" or "wrong") instead of learning and improving their work in the future.

"So there is more receptiveness but a lot of that has not translated into actual action of how funders are making grants."

"Sometimes you have to go away and crunch data, and when you come back decisions have already been made and that affects the uptake. We love throw around real time learning, but it is harder to implement in practice. I can tell you even now – we collect data every quarter, but we collect so much that it takes 2-3 weeks to analyze it and make sense of it and then feed it back to teams. Sometimes we hear 'this is interesting, but we made that decision 2 months ago.'"

- **Be more deliberate in design of MEL around strategic plan, including key decision points**: By working together with program teams to determine learning questions and data of interest, MEL teams can build data collection and learning moments that are more actionable to the decisions that need to be made for a project and an organization. While this may require some flexibility in data collection (ie. planning for times that are helpful to programs, not just appropriate for monitoring or evaluation), this improves the chances that data will actually be used to improve an organization's work.

- **Include MEL uptake into MEL plans from the start, and budget accordingly**: When MEL is actually built into the strategic plan for an organization or a project, program teams can plan around when they will get evidence that they can then use to help them make decisions. Informants also noted that building this into a workplan or strategic plan helped to hold their MEL teams accountable; program teams are relying on data to help them make important choices about program activities, and so it becomes more critical to share data and discuss findings on a predetermined schedule.

"We just reached the end of the second year of our strategy, and we are looking at the third year and the pre-conditions we set, including progress on the first two years and what needs to be adjusted. We are taking those pre-conditions and turning them into milestones. So each year, we have 6-8 milestones we are trying to achieve at the organization level, and then we have project milestones that are bit more granular."

"You can adjust [plans], but there are things you have to wait until the next year or planning period so they can be adjusted in the work. So that has been a challenge, when we can't make adjustments immediately. How we have mitigated this is, before starting the learning process, we go through issues and learning that came up with the team, and it is up to respective team members to identify which [learnings] they are able to apply and which they are not."

Strategies for Uptake of evidence

What the literature says: The grey literature provides many helpful insights into strategies for improving the uptake of evidence that emerges from MEL, including:

- Using real-time evaluation techniques to ensure that the evaluation is built around data being used for adaptation (Rogers and Macfarlan 2021)
- Turning to unusual suspects (like policymakers) to develop the recommendations from evaluation findings to improve their usefulness (Better Evaluation 2021)
- Co-designing the evaluation and learning itself with the intended end user of the evidence to make sure it answers the questions that they care about (Heinkel and Josephson, 2018)
- Finally, for promoting evidence with external audiences, several sources provide actionable recommendations of crafting stories out of evidence, including the Open Contracting Partnership and Miller and Miranda (2018).

"In real-time evaluation (RTE), rapid feedback of findings is provided as part of a field visit or engagement, which is useful when there is scope to make changes in response to real-time data."

- Rogers and Macfarlan, 2021

"Traditionally, evaluators craft recommendations from the conclusions. However, it was suggested bringing on board a policymaker to jointly draft actionable recommendations and policy briefings could help improve evaluation use."

- Better Evaluation, 2021

MEL CHALLENGE 7: Poor learning strategy and approach

- **No systematic approach to organizational learning**: Organizations may face the foundational challenge of developing a systematic approach to learning. Many informants shared that, while adoption of some project learning is done in some instances, this not always consistent across the organization.

- **Challenges in structuring meetings to focus on learning**: Integrating learning into meetings may also be an obstacle for organizations. When meetings are designed to focus on budgeting and programmatic activities, adding learning to the agenda may be seen as superfluous. Further, the timing of learning discussions can be challenging; when projects are completed, staff often needs to shift their focus to new projects, making it difficult to carve out time to reflect on learning for previous projects.

- **Incentives for organizational learning are not always in place**: Informants also noted that they face certain push backs in implementing learning and evidence across the organizations. For organizations in which MEL is seen as "ticking the box," staff does not have incentives to translate findings into organizational planning and strategy.

"It is hard to feed learning from a project into our organizational strategy. They invest a lot into learning from projects, but this does not translate to the organizational level. Those are the main challenges."

"The evaluation that was done, I don't think we put in a lot of work in terms of consuming what came out of this as an organization. It felt like ticking a box. 'This is the evaluation report - tick. Share with our members - tick.'"

Strategies for Learning strategy and approach

- **MEL teams should own and design learning moments**: When MEL teams themselves are empowered to develop and lead learning moments within the organization, program staff is more likely to see this as a consistent and important part of their continued work. While it may be ideal for organizational learning strategies to mature to the point where not all learning is led by the MEL team, this is a critical starting place for most organizations.

- **Use existing organizational spaces to build MEL into work**: Informants shared several innovative ways in which they have been able to make learning less of a burden for staff. These include scheduling five minutes at the start of staff meetings for people to share and reflect on learnings and making a place on websites and other public-facing resources for staff to share learning and reflection.

- **Mix formal and informal learning moments**: Importantly, informants noted that program teams appreciate informal moments to share and reflect and that these informal moments should augment more formal learning approaches.

"The best way we have tried to approach learning is using existing spaces to build in MEL rather than creating new spaces or more zoom meetings, when people are constantly in meetings. We are trying to make it the least amount of work possible while also ensuring that we are getting necessary and interesting insights."

"For example, every staff member has to have at least once every 2 weeks a 30-minute conversation with every other staff member to see where things intersect. I will have the experience where I find something out, and I think about how it relates to something else we are doing, and someone else will say 'oh I didn't know you were doing that.' So the conversation and the proactiveness, making a mental note that this is something my colleague should know about."

MEL CHALLENGE 8: Donor and partner engagement challenges

- **Misalignment between donors, partners, and organizations about MEL goals, methods, and definition of rigor**: Organizations may face the challenge of aligning with their donors and partners on the appropriate indicators and methods for their work. In the case of donor engagement, some informants noted that their funders have specific expectations regarding the type of evaluations and the level of rigor, which the organization may not feel is appropriate for the type of work that they are doing and their own learning and adaptation goals. This issue can also trickle down to partners who are expected to collect certain types of data and develop MEL frameworks for which they do not have the capacity to develop or see the value in creating. Organizations are left to try to find a difficult middle ground between supporting local partners, responding to donor requests, and ensuring that their approach to MEL fits their own needs as well as constraints.

- **Problematic power dynamics**: The misalignment described above is often exacerbated by the real challenge of power imbalances between donors (who are often based in the global north) and partners or implementers based in the global south.

"The challenge there is high demand for learning and impact from donors, from governing bodies. And the kind of learning they are looking for is not low level, it is strategic learning. And from where I come from, I have challenge – because when we focus on learning up there, we have to start from lower level learning to be able to generate information to inform learning up there. But there is feeling we should be able to do learning without pulling from the grassroots. Also there is a push for impact – impact does not happen overnight. But there is push for impact, what has changed, and things don't change overnight."

"When it comes to our partners themselves, sometimes there is a learning curve with partners – we would not necessarily go to a partner and talk about theories of change immediately. We need to speak the language of the people we are working with."

Strategies for Donor and partner engagement

- **Finding a middle ground with donors who are open**: Informants noted that they are increasingly finding that donor representatives are willing to engage in discussion about the right type of MEL for their organizations. While donors may still have certain requirements or constraints for grantees, there may be room to find compromise on indicators or methods that work for both the funder and the organization.

- **Finding light-touch ways to meet donor requirements**: For donors that do have strict requirements, some informants cited that they have sought to find simple tools that they can use to meet those requirements while still reserving resources to undertake MEL that they find more useful for their work.

- **Build dedicated learning moments with local partners**: For programs and organizations with many local partners, one strategy that was shared by several informants was the value in building in learning and reflection with partners themselves. Too often, MEL is an extractive process for partners - they provide data and then do not see the value. By building in learning and reflection that includes local partners, organizations can both build capacity and strengthen the value that partners place on MEL.

"We have made a point to be more direct with funders to say that we need more funding for this work [MEL] if you want to see it, and this is what we mean by impact – it is not just a big policy change and there is a lot that goes into those bigger changes

"For some of our work that ended this past year, we had invested 3-4 years repeatedly bringing together a set of civil society and other stakeholders to jointly co-create a project and a learning agenda, and they all bought into the idea of learning from each other and the project. That is what we aspire to do in all of our projects. It is more and less feasible depending on the nature of the program and budget."

Strategies for Donor and partner engagement

What the literature says: Resources from donors and donor collaboratives further highlight several strategies that organizations can use to improve donor engagement on MEL in particular, including:

- The Transparency and Accountability Initiative's report "Supporting Learning" highlights a range of actions that donors and grantees alike can take to ensure a commitment, culture, systems, and resources for learning in organizations. (Ross 2015)
- The Hewlett Foundation also highlights their own "Hits, Misses, and Advice for Funders" when it comes to supporting learning in grantees in a 2015 blog post. (Scheid 2015)

> *"Be realistic about what to evaluate, how and when. Communicate early, often, and consistently with grantees about your expectations for evaluation of innovative programs. Share resources, examples, and learning from other evaluation work with grantees to help them avoid reinvention or missteps. Many innovators will need to build capacity and get systems in place (some from the ground up) for monitoring and evaluation before they are ready for impact evaluations. Before attempting an impact evaluation, invest in other ground work, such as monitoring and evaluation systems audits (one was done during this formative evaluation), qualitative evaluations, and documenting more specifically the intervention components, including what has been learned from execution, how the approach has been adapted over time and costs.*
>
> \- Scheid 2015

MEL CHALLENGE 9: Weak organizational MEL culture

- **Common MEL misconceptions by program staff**: When program staff have limited involvement or experience with MEL, informants highlighted how staff can have inaccurate beliefs about what MEL is and how it is used. This challenge can be compounded by the use of technical jargon to explain MEL activities. Ultimately, program teams may not see the value of MEL activities - or may see them as a punitive exercise to hold them to account.

> *"Some staff members are very good at MEL, but others' skills are non-existent. Since we do not give them support in terms of MEL capacity, we cannot hold them accountable. It will be something new when you ask members to introduce evidence. They will say 'when I said we were able to influence government to pass this law on contract disclosure, why do you say we need evidence?' It is like big brother, that aspect of asking them to give evidence of what they said makes them jittery."*

- **Program staff lacking MEL knowledge**: Program staff have differing level of familiarity and comfort with MEL, and resources for capacity building for MEL activities may not be available or prioritized. Despite this obstacle, project teams are often expected to undertake data collection and interpretation of findings, even when they do not have the skills to undertake these tasks.

> *"One challenge is that most program people and implementing staff do not have particular knowledge in MEL, and yet they are supposed to implement the work. The other challenge that becomes a bit difficult is the way M&E is perceived and misconception. Some of us use technical jargon and make it look like rocket science and exclude the others. So other people don't see themselves in that work. "*

MEL CHALLENGE 10: Limited staff capacity

MEL CHALLENGE 11: Staffing bandwidth challenges

- **Limited dedicated MEL staffing**: Informants repeatedly shared that their MEL teams are usually under-staffed. In some organizations, one staff member is designated to handle all internal and external MEL-related activities. This can lead to compromises in the quality of work as MEL team members are pulled in many different directions.

- **Program staff with limited bandwidth to add MEL to their role**: With small MEL teams, responsibilities may be transferred to program staff. In addition to facing obstacles due to lack of capacity and perceived value in MEL, program teams are often also stretched with their program work, and adding MEL responsibilities may lead to delays, problems with quality, or the de-prioritization of important data collection, analysis, and sharing.

- **Knowledge transfer when MEL staff leave**: With small MEL teams, the departure of a MEL staff member can be especially challenging. This is especially true when the organization also does not have consistent policies and processes in place that can be seamlessly adopted by new staff members.

“I ran a survey last year because I was getting consistent feedback that people were at capacity and don’t have space to do anything else. So everyone was invited to share feedback, and people were very open. What came back was not that people were working too much (too many hours), but that they were working on too many things so it was taking up a lot of head space. So within that, they had no space to do that kind of reflection – not even learning. When are we going to build this in when we have these hundreds of other things to do."

"Staff are stretched, so it is hard to ask them to set aside time to journal or put in some quantitative data on what they did."

- **Find MEL champions on program teams**: While program teams have limited bandwidth, several informants noted that they have found some program team members who are excited to build their knowledge of and experience with MEL. These informants reported good results from engaging these program team "MEL champions" to both support data collection, analysis and sharing and to further improve their program team's perception of the value of MEL.

- **Undertake MEL capacity building for program teams**: Program team do not need to become MEL experts; however, informants highlighted that light-touch MEL capacity building and training opportunities for staff has helped to both engage program teams more and improve the quality of MEL activities that they perform.

- **Make "demystifying MEL" part of the role of MEL staff**: Like all fields, MEL has its own language and jargon which can serve to alienate those that are new to this area of work. When MEL staff can work with program teams to help them understand the jargon of "theories of change" and "purposive sampling," this can go a long way in making program staff more willing to engage on MEL work.

"I have found it useful to count some of those staff who really understand MEL as allies, get them to essentially be my speaker within their teams, so having allies planted in teams who understand what you need and can be the internal voices within teams."

"When you come in heavy with MEL jargon, people get intimidated and push back. So I designed a simple excel tool – instead of talking about results, we talked about milestones. People understand this language. And now we ask teams: what milestones have you achieved each quarter. It is branded as a milestone and that has really helped us. It helps us to have conversations – this is what you planned, this is what happened."

Other Strategies for Supporting MEL in Fiscal Governance + Social Justice

- **Focus MEL explicitly on what program teams are willing to adapt**: Sometimes program teams or organizations have part of their strategies and work plans that are non-negotiable; informants noted that these are generally not things on which to spend MEL time and resources. If the organization is not going to change their approach based on learning and evidence, it may be counterproductive to evaluate that particular approach.

- **Make MEL itself adaptable**: Like programs, MEL itself should be flexible and adaptable. Rather than assuming that a MEL plan will always be right, MEL staff should build in their own learning and reflection moments - and be willing to change course if data collection, analysis, and learning methods are not working.

- **Publishing monitoring data and progress stories can be a way to hold organization accountable for doing MEL**: One informant noted that they were able to improve the implementation and uptake of MEL among their staff when they began publishing learning on a consistent basis on their website. While this may not be the right fit for every organization, it is a strategy that may be worth exploring if program staff struggle to prioritize learning and reflection.

Structural Drivers of Common MEL Challenges

The previous section has focused on MEL challenges that appear consistently in the work of fiscal governance and social justice organizations and the actionable strategies recommended by those working on these challenges. However, these challenges have deep and complex root causes that deserve further exploration and work. Informants highlight some of the questions we need to consider regarding the underlying structural drivers of common MEL problems:

- **What are the assumptions and mental models that may be preventing cultures of evidence generation and uptake from taking hold?** There are many reasons that organization leaders, donors, program teams, and partners in the global north may shy away from new evidence and take comfort in the status quo. While these underlying assumptions and perspectives are hard to discuss, it is critical that we look at them honestly to address why MEL is not always supported at the organizational level.

- **How can we build both incentives and capacity to share honest MEL learnings across organizations?** Monitoring and evaluation and learning can reveal things that are not working within an approach, a strategy, or an organization, and without incentives and support to share these learnings transparently, we miss big opportunities to drive changes in not just how organizations work – but in how the system as a whole operates. MEL will always have a role in demonstrating impact, but a larger shift is needed to ensure MEL also teaches us how we can improve and where there are gaps in our work.

How did COVID affect MEL for organizations?

COVID

When asked about the impact of COVID-19 on MEL implementation and uptake, informants shared both negative and positive changes they experienced during the pandemic:

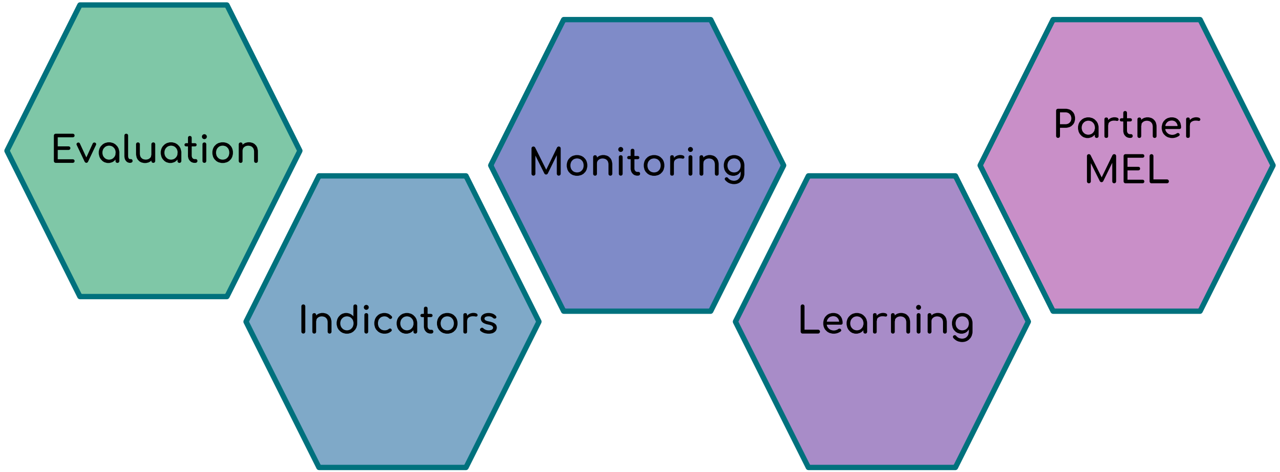
- Moving to virtual data collection, sharing, and learning – draining + overwhelming
- Staff feeling overstretched
- Challenges building MEL capacity virtually – within team and with partners
- Challenges in hiring enumerators during lockdowns
- Difficulties in tracking learning, outcomes, and progress virtually
- Feeling of being disconnected from partners and targets of work

- Getting better at virtual learning, including the adoption of new tools and technology for learning
- COVID itself provided valuable learning opportunities
- Staff does not need to focus as much on planning big events and can instead focus on outcomes
- Challenges with COVID re-enforced the importance of work on fiscal governance and social justice – internally and externally

Appendix & Bibliography

Appendix - Approaches

In addition to questions about challenges and strategies, we asked informants to share the approaches they use for their organization's MEL. They provided a range of insights that may prompt ideas for readers who are looking to update their MEL approaches, including:



Appendix - Approaches

Informant approaches to organizational **evaluation** included:

Internally, we are experimenting with a **light touch contribution analysis**.

When it comes to evaluation, the thing we have is **our yearly evaluation which is led by an external consultant**. We predefine the criteria for the evaluation, and they deliver an evaluation report.

We have an **outcome harvesting** tool, we progressively use to ensure we are tracking incremental changes to outcomes.

Evaluation

Evaluation is built on top of monitoring. We try to do monitoring in ways that informs ongoing program implementation, generating and using data that we then make available to or connect to evaluation processes.

We have a **mix of quantitative and qualitative methods** – it always has to be mixed, at least in the governance world. You cannot just have quantitative methods.

Appendix - Approaches

Informant approaches to **designing and collecting indicators** included:

We have a set of **performance indicators that are aligned with our strategy**, so every time we have a new strategy, we go through an internal exercise to discuss what success looks like each year.

Indicators

We focus on **both quantitative and qualitative indicators** – every project has a monitoring framework, and in that, there are specific indicators that focus on small progressive realizations of changes taking shape.

One of our most important institutional targets is the **number of impact stories shared with the public per year - and progress stories per year**. A progress story has some outcome achieved, but it is not yet at the full impact level. This could be because there are challenges, and we may get there but it may take longer. It is important to document these as well because it tells where different partners are on the journey and some progress outcomes are important and valuable – we have created a new collaboration or there has been a policy change. We want to tell those stories as well for the learning and because the case studies serve community in other ways. People want to learn to from each other, from each others' strategies.

Appendix - Approaches

Informant approaches to **monitoring** included:

Our approach is **participatory monitoring** where all stakeholders involved in the work get the opportunity through quarterly review with implementing staff to give feedback – and this feedback helps track the progress and make changes necessary.

The other tool is an **activity and output tracker**. We have project staff record every or most outputs and activities that are taking place as much as their capacity allows and looking at what went well, what did not, who did we reach, what sort of impact it had and what can we do differently next time.

Monitoring

We also do **community surveys** on what our community has been telling us – they recently said to focus more on sustainability, so we introduced a new target into our strategy.

We know that we need indicators, that is inevitable. So what we did was come up with what we call aligned indicators. These were defined with all of our members. We agreed on 7 indicators, from the outcome level to the output level. But we know it is not enough, it is more than just an indicator. So we also report stories, because we think that storytelling is the best way to tell about progress. We talk to our members, have sessions usually once a year, to give time to people to come up with their experiences. **We have indicators, and we have stories.**

On monitoring, we try to **strike a balance between donor monitoring requirements and what our teams, partners, and we as an organization would find useful**. Threading that needle is art and science.

Appendix - Approaches

Informant approaches to **learning** included:

My team set up **5 learning sprints** – very structured spaces, with leadership involved to play an anchor role and to shepherd the conversation. We had staff who were tapped to provide input, and there are chunks of time set aside for us to reflect on evaluation findings for example.

Getting to double-loop [two-way] learning is worth celebrating when we get there because the interests of teams and partners is often "what do we do tomorrow, how do we do this activity better" and so some of the "so what" questions are harder to get to. I like the framing of "did we do this right" vs. "did we do the right things."

Learning

So I wouldn't say it is structured in that **it can take many forms** – sometimes learning happens in a call and then I share it in slack. Sometimes it is someone analyzing the data from our latest report and then we share it in a formal presentation or blog. So it is not a formal structure but it is pretty constant.

We do a **deep dive learning session** every 2 weeks, the topic changes depending on what people want to learn and share about.

The final way we have been trying to do learning is by **bringing together different partners and allies in the field** to learn from each other. Last year we held a series of community calls focusing on different issues facing the field like integrating human rights into economic responses to Covid, seeing where people are finding success and challenges.

Appendix - Approaches

Beyond the specific components of MEL and measurement, informants shared their tips and approaches to supporting MEL for partners, including:

One thing that is very important is that we are always **co-creating and revising work with partners**, and that is a lot of the learning. And we talk to partners, we hear that they would like to see more clear priorities in the support. So we talk to them and hear what they would like to improve.

And the final layer is where we work with local partners, so we try to **integrate our MEL tools and practices to their own** with varying degrees of success. So, and my team - depending on the program, we may have more or less direct engagement with our partner's MEL. Sometimes we are very hands-on, working on frameworks and tools. Sometimes our engagement is more indirect, working with program teams, and then they work with those partners.

Partner MEL

We work on creating that awareness and being **more holistic with M&E** rather than it being a specific survey sent out at certain points in the year. Instead, we integrate these questions into our regular conversations.

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