

Bright spots

More productively learning at scale

Bright spots offer critical models for innovation in monitoring, evaluation, and learning. This section provides multiple examples of bright spot organizations that are already succeeding or showing promise in more productively learning at scale. These are meant to provide inspiration and examples of how innovative practices have actually been implemented.

1 Data, learning, and knowledge are shared openly and widely

- *Developing an open data policy*

The Laura and John Arnold Foundation (LJAF) created Guidelines for Investments in Research, criteria to ensure that research funded by LJAF meets the most rigorous standards of quality and transparency. The Guidelines require researchers receiving funding from LJAF to preregister their studies through the Open Science Framework before statistical analyses are performed and, if possible, before data are collected. In addition to preregistering studies, researchers are also expected to make their datasets and computer code publicly available to the extent possible while respecting any confidentiality or privacy requirements. Finally, researchers must report the results of the studies even if they are not published in a peer-reviewed journal. LJAF instituted the Guidelines to reduce publication bias and improve the reliability of empirical analysis.

- *Developing a social sector repository that makes open access to social sector knowledge an easy and expected practice*

Foundation Center's IssueLab is an open repository, providing free access to more than 20,000 social sector knowledge products such as case studies, evaluations, and white papers. Operating on the principle that "knowledge is a public good" which should be freely accessible to all, IssueLab encourages and enables the open publishing of field-based knowledge as expected practice in foundations and nonprofits. It also works with organizations to develop and curate topical collections that build on – and in turn, contribute to – the larger IssueLab platform when materials are added.

- *Enabling field-wide learning by sharing detailed data with researchers*

Crisis Text Line, a nonprofit that provides counseling services to teens via text message, shares detailed, anonymized data with approved researchers. Over 32 million text messages have been exchanged via Crisis Text Line since its launch, making it the U.S.'s largest open set of crisis data. The volume of messages and variety of content enables researchers to investigate trends and explore services and policies that can better support teens facing personal crises. One group of researchers, for example, is investigating how LGBTQ youth in various zip codes talk about their experiences and then is comparing those experiences to local school and government policies.

- *Using prospective registries to promote transparency and avoid the dangers of "publication bias"*

AllTrials, an international initiative led in the U.S. by Sense About Science USA, Dartmouth's Geisel School of Medicine and the Dartmouth Institute for Health Policy & Clinical Practice, promotes the pre-registration of studies with an agreement to fully disclose study methods and results. The objective is to reduce the tendency of organizations to publicly share only positive results, which skews the field's understanding of what works and what doesn't. One example of the dangers of this "publication bias" was discovered with an anti-arrhythmia medication Lorcaïnide. Numerous people died because original studies pointing to problems weren't published, resulting in other manufacturers developing similar drugs.

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2 Knowledge gaps and learning agendas are collaboratively undertaken

- *Championing greater transparency in philanthropy by holding up a mirror to foundations*

Glasspockets, an initiative of Foundation Center, has created an online platform for foundations to share information in a centralized and easily comparable manner. One of Glasspocket's tools allows foundations to measure their own transparency compared to their peers by assessing their current practice against 25 indicators. Among the transparency indicators included are: performance measurement, feedback from grantees, and the sharing of knowledge being funded or produced. Thus far, 86 foundations have publicly joined the effort by sharing their assessments on the site. The Glasspockets blog, Transparency Talk, regularly updates foundation audiences about emerging and best practices in philanthropic transparency.

- *Collaborating with grantees to create a shared learning agenda and collectively prioritize issue areas*

The Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Change initiative created a learning community of its multi-year grantees and collaborated with them to develop a shared "learning agenda." The learning agenda, driven by the grantees' challenges and open questions, enabled the Foundation and its grantees to prioritize issue areas and tackle them together. Managers and frontline staff from each organization met every six weeks as a "shared learning and evaluation" working group. A different grantee hosted each meeting, allowing the grantees to see one another's sites and further enabling peer-to-peer learning.

- *Creating grantee cohorts that learn together with built-in evaluation support for the collective*

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, a private funder in Southern California, embeds collective learning in its six strategic initiatives, each of which may involve as many as 50 grantees working toward a shared set of goals. An external partner manages the evaluation and learning for each initiative. Edmund Cain, vice president of grant programs with the foundation, describes the approach: "[The evaluation partner's] job is not to issue a report card on each grantee's performance but to track the collective impact...on that particular issue over time." This strategy not only promotes collaborative learning, but also reduces the burden on grantees to manage their evaluation and learning.

- *Mapping evidence gaps to help identify strategic research priorities*

3ie, an international development grantmaking NGO, develops evidence gap maps (EGMs) to facilitate evidence informed decision-making about program and research investments. EGMs are collections of information on the effects of development policies and programs in a particular sector or thematic area, such as education, water, sanitation, hygiene, and adolescent health. They provide a graphical display of existing and ongoing systematic reviews and impact evaluations in a sector or sub-sector, structured around a framework of interventions and outcomes. 3ie maps are available on an interactive online platform, which allows users to explore the evidence base and findings of relevant studies. By identifying what we know and do not know about "what works", the EGMs can be used to inform strategic priorities. For example, 3ie found that in the land use and forestry sector, few studies assess if forest protection activities result in trade-offs between food security and climate change mitigation, suggesting new studies are needed to address this gap.

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3 Data is integrated at scale needed to assess social impact

- *Using a shared measurement system to see the progress of both the field and individual organizations*

Grounded Solution's HomeKeeper program standardizes the way affordable housing programs across their sector track data, measure outcomes, and implement effective practices. Over 70 member organizations pay an annual fee to use HomeKeeper, a cloud-based app. Built by and for practitioners, HomeKeeper helps programs manage their day to day program activities, while tracking a core set of fields to produce a common social impact report. HomeKeeper organizations seamlessly share social impact data with the HomeKeeper National Data Hub where information is aggregated and shared across the sector. HomeKeeper's shared measurement system creates an understanding of how the field as a whole is meeting the needs of underserved buyers, but also allows members to benchmark their data to their peers.

- *Connecting local place-based initiatives to inform national field building*

National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) combines local expertise with the power of a national peer-learning network to strengthen communities. NNIP is made up of independent data intermediaries in 30 cities that have a shared mission to help community stakeholders use neighborhood-level data for better decision-making, with a focus on assisting organizations and residents in underserved communities. NNIP is supported and coordinated by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan research organization. One of Urban Institute's roles is to lead cross-site initiatives across local partners, enabling them to share their successes and challenges, and then synthesizes lessons from their work to inform other localities, as well as national policy. The Partnership recently launched "Turning the Corner", for example, a pilot project in Detroit, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and other cities to develop protocols and methodologies for monitoring neighborhood revitalization that can then be adapted by other cities and used to advance the field.

- *Creating a location-based open data platform to improve transparency and decision-making*

Connecticut Data Collaborative (CT Data), a cross-sector partnership, compiles data from disparate sources including the state's various departments, integrates and curates the data, and provides open access in order to inform residents, nonprofits, policymakers, and funders. CT Data enables users to access organized, processed data or download raw data for independent analysis. CT Data provides over 135 datasets that can be explored by topic (e.g., education, housing) and Connecticut geographies. By making data accessible, CT Data has informed planning, policy, and decision-making. For example, as part of the Racial Profiling Prohibition Project, communities have access to town-level traffic stop data by race.

- *Building a social sector big data platform to share social impact data*

Illumidata, a suite of data services currently under development by the Council of Michigan Foundations in collaboration with leaders in data analytics, aggregates and analyzes data for social sector actors of all sizes. The platform will provide access and analysis for baseline data that includes more than 500,000 social data sets across issue areas. Organizations can also contribute their own data, protected by a rigorous data rights management policy. Users can then overlay their own program data with related public data and the shared data of other users, leading to greater insight, more meaningful impact assessment, and the identification of gaps and trends.

- *Bringing diverse datasets together to make invisible connections visible*

The Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) is an open platform managed by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to share data about humanitarian crises. The goal of HDX is to make data easier to find and use for analysis. Over 200 organizations are sharing 4,400 datasets that are being accessed by users in almost every country in the world. For example, HDX includes 84 datasets for the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, covering changes in global food prices, landslide locations, health infrastructure, and population movements. These datasets can be analyzed together to understand recovery efforts in Nepal. Building on the work of HDX, OCHA will establish a new Centre for Humanitarian Data in The Hague in mid-2017 to further increase data use and impact in the humanitarian sector.

- *Using common indicators to compare progress across geographies*

The Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta joined 20 states and four cities in producing an annual Civic Health Index, using common indicators that enable comparison across the participating geographies and through time. When the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta made the Civic Health Index its primary gauge for progress, it adopted the common indicators already used by the other participating geographies. It collected the same data points for comparison in 2014, and has continued to collect data at regular intervals thereafter. In the interim, the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta has enhanced its efforts to seek common data within the metropolitan region's 23-counties and has worked with the Atlanta Regional Council's "Metro Voices" project. Consistently using these common indicators, enables the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta to compare across peer organizations and across time.

- *Creating an open platform to integrate diverse data sources and improve decision making*

Water Point Data Exchange, a global data platform, enables the access, sharing, and synthesis of data on water availability and distribution. The Water Point Data Exchange (WPDx) uses a collaboratively developed standard to bring together water source datasets being collected by governments, researchers, and nonprofit organizations around the world. Over 300,000 records from nearly 30 countries have been brought together in the WPDx Repository, enabling access to current water data so that all stakeholders can work more effectively.

- *Harnessing the energy and power of a global network to spread and adapt common standards*

The Conservation Measures Partnership (CMP), a global partnership of leading conservation organizations, agencies, and funders, seeks to make conservation efforts more effective and efficient. CMP has a common process and language to better design, manage, monitor, and learn from conservation actions. This adaptive management process and an associated common classification system have been used by thousands of projects and programs to describe and plan conservation efforts and to lay a foundation for teams implementing similar actions to learn from one another. Key products include the Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation, the IUCN-CMP threats and actions classifications, and Miradi adaptive management software. CMP partners with the Conservation Coaches Network, a global network of conservation professionals that support teams on the ground, helping them build their capacity to learn from and continuously improve their conservation efforts.

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Evaluation synthesis, replication, and meta-evaluation are supported

- *Creating a data network to enable scaled insights*

Proving Ground, an initiative at Harvard University's Center for Education Policy Research, aims to make gathering evidence of program effectiveness cheaper, faster, and easier for education agencies. Although education agencies have the data needed to measure program impact, including student and staff administrative data, few have been able to use that data for continuous educational improvement. Proving Ground works with a network of districts and charter management organizations to provide an evaluation infrastructure that allows for rapid-cycle implementation and impact analyses for programs being used across the network.

- *Using big data to monitor global trends*

HPE Earth Insights, an initiative from Conservation International and Hewlett Packard Enterprise, provides nearly real-time analytics about species in tropical rainforests at 16 sites across 14 countries. Earth Insights manages a consistent stream of camera trap and climate measurement data collected through the Tropical Ecology Assessment and Monitoring (TEAM) Network, a coalition of Conservation International, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Wildlife Conservation Society. Through the Wildlife Picture Index, HPE Earth Insights has allowed researchers to track declines in diversity within and across sites to understand the effects of climate and land use change on biodiversity and how different conservation strategies work. The rapid data analysis, which previously required manual handling, has allowed conservationists to proactively respond to changes as they emerge.

- *Promoting replication to confirm the robustness of impact evaluation evidence*

3ie, an international development grantmaking NGO, established its replication program in 2012 to improve the quality and reliability of impact evaluation evidence. It incentivizes the replication of influential, innovative, and controversial evaluations of development interventions. 3ie supports efforts to use existing data to reproduce and test the strength of published results. Independent replication lends increased credibility to impact evaluation evidence, whether the studies confirm the robustness of the original findings or provide additional insights suggesting alternative pathways. 3ie oversees the multi-stage replication paper review process, publishes the resulting papers, and acts as a thought leader for research transparency.

- *Aggregating clearinghouses across multiple issue areas*

The Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative created the Results First Clearinghouse Database, a one-stop online resource that provides information on the effectiveness of various interventions as rated by eight national research clearinghouses. The clearinghouses included in the Database conduct systematic research reviews to identify what works in areas including youth development, criminal justice, and education. To address the challenges posed by the existence of multiple clearinghouses, the Database compiles the information in one place, reconciles the different clearinghouse rating systems, and provides the data in a clear, accessible format.

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- *Creating a "one-stop meta-analysis shop" to help improve collective knowledge*

Cochrane, a global network of researchers, professionals, patients, and people interested in health, works to improve evidence-informed health decisions by producing high-quality, systematic health study reviews. Cochrane's network of 37,000 members from more than 130 countries, can serve as a powerful resource for meta-analyses of what works. The systematic reviews provide transparent overviews of the range of research studies on a given health subject to assess the current state of knowledge for that topic.

- *Synthesizing existing evaluative evidence to inform strategy*

Foundation Center's IssueLab collaborated with a foundation on a synthesis review of key success factors required to achieve social, economic, and ecological benefits for small-scale coastal fisheries in developing countries. The synthesis review aggregated existing data from more than 150 reports to identify 20 key factors believed to influence success in small-scale fisheries. For each factor, the review lists what is known in the literature, identifies different stakeholder priorities, and provides critical questions for funders and implementing organizations. The final synthesis, an interactive visualization of key findings, and a digital collection of the reports used in the synthesis, were all openly licensed and made freely available through IssueLab. The foundation then used the findings to guide the development of a new initiative strategy.

- *Promoting accountability and incentivizing responsiveness through a public feedback forum*

Great Nonprofits (GNP), an online platform for crowd-sourced information about nonprofits, is building greater transparency about the work of nonprofits through its centralized, open forum. GNP relies on contributors who have direct experience with the nonprofit (e.g., volunteers, constituents, donors) to provide authentic reviews of their experience, similar to Tripadvisor in the private sector. This crowd-sourced approach allows users interested in a particular nonprofit to gain a more comprehensive understanding of that nonprofit before deciding whether to invest time or money. It also enables nonprofits to learn in real-time while creating strong incentives for nonprofits to be responsive and to improve their user experience.

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