

Calls to action

More effectively putting decision-making at the center

Through our research, innovation lab and multiple convenings, we've gathered promising calls to action to inspire innovation. These calls to action include actions that individual organizations can undertake, as well as calls to action for collections of organizations. They are hypotheses about what can spur decision-making at the center, and they are meant to provoke further ideas, adaptations, and refinements.

1 Information for on-the-ground decision-making is prioritized

Putting decision-making at the center means first and foremost that front-line decision-makers serving constituents directly have the information they need for effective decision-making beyond a focus on accountability reporting. These calls to action explore possible calls to action to reach that goal:



Innovating new ways of creating and sharing monitoring results: Grant reports are typically a great deal of work for grantees, yet are too often left unread and are seldom used in significant ways by foundations for ongoing decision-making. What could it look like if grant reporting was fundamentally rethought? What if a funder worked with grantees (individually or in related clusters) to use data that is meaningful for the grantees first and foremost, or data that is already collected by the grantees, but would suffice for compliance and monitoring purposes for the foundation?



Differentiating the roles of funders and nonprofits in developing evidence: Nonprofits do not generally have the resources, skills, or incentives to rigorously evaluate impact. What if a foundation or group of foundations took responsibility for testing the quality of broad ideas (e.g. does microfinance work) and nonprofits were only responsible for assessing the quality of their implementation (e.g. monitoring)?¹⁷

2 Learning is embedded and continuous

To get to a better future where foundation and nonprofit cultures better promote ongoing learning for improvement, possible approaches include a focus on barriers, incentives, and promoting innovation:



Applying behavioral design principles to help organizations better understand the barriers to organizational learning: Many foundations and nonprofits aspire to be "learning organizations," but struggle with how in practical terms to embed organizational learning into their culture and operations. Can we adapt materials in the rapidly emerging behavioral design space to create a diagnostic and tools to help funders and/or nonprofits understand where and why measurement processes break down and better implement organizational learning?



Incentivizing iterative, rapid-cycle and adaptive learning: The fear of sharing negative information can stifle innovation and growth. Can a group of funders systematically experiment with multiple approaches that reward grantees for identifying problems and solutions rather than the results themselves?



Lifting up learning as a core pillar: Given that establishing learning cultures in the social sector continues to be a challenge, what if funders explored how to promote "decision-based evidence making"? What if a group of funders held a challenge or offered incentives for organizations that developed innovations in testing hypotheses and experimenting to promote action-oriented learning?



Developing ratings and benchmarking of philanthropies on their setting of strategic goals and their learning: Using established learning organization best practices, can we develop ways to assess how well organizations are integrating strategic learning into their practices to drive improvement and accountability?

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3 There is greater investment in monitoring, evaluation, and learning capacity

Beyond simply increasing resources spent on individual capacity-building, we have heard ideas to promote realistic expectations for leadership and efforts to promote creative ways to serve the field more broadly:



Training board members to set more realistic expectations for evaluation: Board members play a crucial role in determining the priorities of their organizations, yet they often have little knowledge about the challenges and limitations for assessing impact. Can we create board training materials that both inform board members of what to look for and set realistic expectations for evidence development?



Developing a “minute-clinic”-like mass MEL offering: With a focus on right-sized and cost-effective approaches, can evaluators move beyond an individualized approach to provide mass customization serving large numbers of nonprofits as needed? Could a funder pilot an offering that promoted widely available, “good enough” services?



Promoting rotating resources: What if funders supported evaluation “circuit riders” who could cost-effectively rotate through a number of nonprofit organizations to act as coaches in evaluative thinking and the use of available organizational and issue area evidence?

4 The data and methods needed to inform decisions are available

To get to a better future with higher quality and more sufficient data, we need to think beyond incremental improvements. The following are calls to action that could be tried to jump-start wider analytics and technology use in the sector:



Creating integrated data and social science approach(es) for evidence development: The role of data scientists in the social sector is likely to grow substantially over time, yet data scientists and social scientists have very different training, knowledge, and assumptions. What if data scientists and social scientists were brought together in a systematic effort to define an integrated approach to roles and evidence creation in the social sector?



Creating embedded technology capacity to develop widely needed tools: Insufficient and low-quality data is pervasive in the social sector. Technology tools and infrastructure development could help simplify MEL tasks for organizations, and cross-functional teams could help build internal capacity. What if a funder or funders promoted a “Code for America”-like model with MEL and data analytics teams for a year of service to develop digital tools? The team could be embedded in a single foundation, but could would work on organizational-level tools and technologies that would be relevant across an issue area.



Conducting R&D on promising technologies: There is some debate about the efficacy and biases of new technologies and techniques for the social sector, such as predictive analytics and machine learning. What if a funder supported an R&D initiative to test the applicability and usefulness of data analytics approaches (i.e. how accurate and effective were they, given concerns about underlying data)?

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