

Calls to action

More productively learning at scale

To get to a better future in which we are able to overcome knowledge and data silos to more productively learn at scale, we need to go beyond what we're doing today to embrace much more coordinated and integrated monitoring, evaluation, and learning. However, it is important to note that most activity will likely be at the level of issue areas rather than the social sector as a whole. The following are some high-priority hypotheses about how to get to the better future for learning at scale.

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

How can we share what we're learning, good and bad, at a much greater level than we do today? Beyond the open knowledge and data policies discussed in the earlier section, there are multiple calls to action that funders can try:



Overcoming disincentives to share among nonprofits: Nonprofit programs are typically evaluated individually. What if a funder or group of funders provided incentives to a group of grantees working in the same issue area with different theories of change to support aggregated learning and evaluation across multiple organizations?



Expanding the scope of "what works" directories: One concern about "what works" directories is the focus on wide applicability of program-level evidence. What if a directory or directories experimented with compiling evidence using more selection criteria than experimental rigor: looking at the likelihood of effectiveness in different settings and populations, with variation in implementation approaches; and/or at community and systems-levels? ²⁸



Building trust among intermediaries through anonymization: One disincentive to share data is that foundations and nonprofits do not want to be publically penalized for adverse results. What if several nonprofits in an issue area submit their data and results to a trusted intermediary, who then anonymized and aggregated the data? Or if a foundation incentivized nonprofits to contribute?

2 Knowledge gaps and learning agendas are collaboratively undertaken

To get to a better future where we work more collaboratively with other organizations in understanding and developing learning agendas in our issue areas, the development of evidence maps and synthetic literature reviews we brought up. We also heard other creative ideas that could be tried:



Creating a diagnostic for helping groups learn together: Some issue areas are much further along in terms of shared learnings, data collaboration, and collective knowledge development than others. What if a funder supported the creation of a diagnostic that detailed and assessed the conditions that need to exist and key choices for collective learning for an issue area?



Promoting issue-level, action-oriented learning: What would it look like if more foundations operated as "learning foundations," orienting grantmaking to help answer key questions needed by other decision-makers in the issue area? What if one or several existing funders experimented with using a part of their portfolio to focus specifically on funding to answer key learning questions to spread the practice? What if organizations who work with those setting up new foundations helped explore this approach?

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3 Data is integrated at scale needed to assess social impact

Open, shared and integrated data are watchwords in thinking creatively about what to try to increase the scale and speed at which we learn:



Enabling better sharing of data through integrated data sets: Governmental administrative data often contains important data related to social interventions, yet it is often either not available to social sector organizations or not configured to answer outcome-related questions. What if a group of funders working on a particular issue mapped and developed the ecosystem for the use of administrative data sets to understand intervention outcomes?



Promoting open source and data extraction: There are basic technical challenges involved in sharing data in the social sector given the number of proprietary systems and the structure of existing systems that limit data extraction. This can be relevant for sharing across organizations and within them. What a funder of funders supported the development of tools to enable data extraction and sharing from key systems for a given issue area?



Promoting common data hubs: Connecting program management software to a common data hub for a given issue area can enable benchmarking and aggregated information. What if a set of funders and grantees worked to assess the necessary conditions for developing this or related models for specific issue areas and then put their learnings into action?

4 Evaluation synthesis, replication, and meta-evaluation are supported

To get to a better future with higher-quality information in the social sector, the following calls to action may help us better learn across individual studies, data sets, and methodologies:



Testing different large-scale approaches: There are presently different hypotheses about how best to learn about variability in what works in an issue area, including multi-site evaluation approaches and data analytics approaches (e.g. machine learning). What if a funder chose an issue area and compared learnings using both approaches?



Dedicating resources to synthesize existing literature: There is extensive existing research in the field, but much of it is unavailable in a digestible way. For a given issue area, what if a funder or collection of funders shared data/studies and support issue curators/translators to synthesize existing research to create a series of comprehensive issue area reviews?



Enabling safe independent verification of the information of others: It can be a challenge to balance data openness with privacy and usage. For a particular issue area, what if a third party intermediary served as a responsible gatekeeper to increase accessibility to and safeguards for key social impact datasets?

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