Collaborating to capture and share cross-program learnings: Lessons learned and best practices

ACTIF working group

The following lessons learned and best practices have been documented through the activities of the ACTIF working group. This working group brings together Canadian organizations that have received funding from the ACTIF Fund to carry out, in partnership with organizations in the South, projects that strengthen the respect, protection and fulfillment of the human rights of LGBTQ2I people.

Lessons learned:

1. The conventional approach to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) sometimes hinders learning.

Organizations working for LGBTQI+ rights find that current evaluation practices, focused on accountability and compliance with donors, limit their ability to truly analyze their work and improve. This approach leaves little room for collective reflection, real-time adaptation, and informal learning, while reporting requirements, perceived as burdensome, mobilize resources at the expense of analysis and the sharing of lessons learned.

2. The conventional approach to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning can reinforce North-South power imbalances.

The conventional approach to Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL), often centered on logic models and indicators imposed by donors, sometimes contributes to reproducing a colonial dynamic where knowledge and legitimacy are perceived as coming from the North. When they impose frameworks, tools, and technical language that do not take local realities into account, organizations in the North force organizations in the South to conform to external standards, to the detriment of their own ways of evaluating, learning, and reflecting.

3. All organizations have a role to play in putting learning at the center of initiatives

All organizations, including donors, can play an active role in changing the way Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning is designed and used. This involves valuing the knowledge and ways of doing things of communities. Organizations can propose more participatory methods that encourage exchange and collective reflection. By avoiding the imposition of evaluation tools and allowing communities to express in their own words what they are experiencing and learning, organizations contribute to building practices that are fairer, more useful, and more conducive to change.

Best practices:

1 **Promoting mutual learning**

Mutual learning is based on mutual recognition of the knowledge, experiences, and expertise of each stakeholder. It involves creating open spaces for dialogue, where different perspectives are valued, and where lessons learned from practice can influence approaches and decisions, including those concerning program structure and funding arrangements. In the context of international solidarity projects for LGBTQI+ rights, promoting mutual learning means recognizing the expertise of organizations in the Global South and the communities directly involved, whose role is not only to implement projects or benefit from them, but also to co-define the results to be achieved and co-develop the best strategies to get there.

2 **Trusting and valuing the practices of local organizations**

Many monitoring and evaluation practices rely more on control than on collaboration and trust, which can undermine project results. Donors and partners in the North should make efforts to recognize and value the monitoring mechanisms of organizations in the South, rather than requiring them to adopt Northern practices, such as imposed timesheets or a standardized billing model. Some administrative requirements reflect an implicit mistrust and a desire for control, when efforts should be focused on achieving results and improving practices.

3 **Deconstructing traditional terminology**

In the field of international solidarity, many terms convey power relations inherited from unequal North-South relations. The language of Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL), as commonly used, reflects a normative logic that can render local knowledge invisible. The use of concepts such as "indicators," "results," and "impact," while relevant in certain contexts, should be called into question to avoid imposing a single vision of change that is often disconnected from local realities. The term "evaluation" itself, often associated with measurement and control, can be perceived as intimidating or offensive, hindering stakeholder engagement.

Deconstructing terminology means recognizing that other ways of knowing, learning, and storytelling exist, and that they are equally valid. It is not just a matter of including the voices of the South, but of ensuring that they are truly central.

4 **Using the learning circles approach**

Learning circles create safe, horizontal, and reflective spaces for sharing experiences, asking questions, listening, and learning together. Circles foster a dynamic where each person is a source of knowledge. This approach is particularly well-suited to sensitive contexts, such as defending the rights of LGBTQI+ people, as it recognizes the complexity of lived experiences and brings out lessons rooted in practice. It also values emotions, uncertainties, and contradictions as sources of learning and helps build collective memory. Circles can take many forms—informal exchanges, workshops, team retreats—and would benefit from being integrated on a regular basis, for example, every quarter, starting from the project design stage.

5 **Valuing stories and narratives of change**

Beyond quantitative indicators, stories and narratives of change offer a valuable window into the real impacts of projects. They capture the richness, complexity, and subjectivity of the experiences of those involved. Stories of change also shed light on effects that are often overlooked by traditional tools: increased self-esteem, changing social dynamics, the creation of new spaces for solidarity, etc. In order for these stories to play their rightful role in learning processes, they must be told, listened to, shared, and considered as data in their own right.

This involves creating flexible and respectful narrative frameworks where people can express themselves in their own words, in their own language, and according to their own cultural references. Valuing stories also means recognizing that social change cannot be measured solely by numbers, but by transformations that are experienced and recounted.

6   Allocating resources and time for learning activities

Learning does not happen by chance. For learning to be real, useful, and sustainable, it must be planned and provided with sufficient human, financial, and time resources. Too often, learning activities are relegated to the end of projects or integrated in a marginal way, without any real recognition of their value. However, reflecting together, documenting practices, learning lessons, and adapting strategies all require time, specific skills, and shared commitment. It is essential that project budgets explicitly include lines for learning, documentation, and knowledge dissemination.

7   Raising awareness among donors about the importance of adapting their approaches

Donors have a key role to play in transforming Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning approaches and supporting more equitable and inclusive learning. This requires recognizing their own biases and the power dynamics they contribute to maintaining, sometimes unintentionally. By relaxing their requirements, accepting diverse narrative formats, co-constructing monitoring frameworks, and funding participatory approaches, donors can promote practices that strengthen local capacities. Raising awareness among donors also means inviting them to listen to community members and local organizations, to incorporate their feedback, and to recognize their evaluation and accountability mechanisms as legitimate. Some donors are beginning to move in this direction, but there is still significant work to be done to shift from a model of control to one of trust and collective learning.

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