A CASE STORY:
The MacArthur Foundation's Approach to Evaluation and Learning

Introduction

This case story provides a snapshot of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning—an approach that seeks to inform program strategy and is grounded in the Foundation's mission and values.[1] It reflects findings from a series of one-on-one interviews, small-group discussions, and surveys conducted from late 2019 through the summer of 2020 with the MacArthur Foundation's senior leadership, program teams, the Office of Evaluation, and the Foundation's evaluation and learning partners.[2]

Topics explored through the interviews and surveys included how evaluation and learning partnerships help inform the strategic direction of the Foundation's work, the evolution of engagements with partners, and the benefits and challenges of the Foundation's approach. Interview and survey data analyzed were complemented by a high-level review of relevant literature about the relationship between strategy, evaluation, and learning to provide additional context. The sections that follow represent the culmination of that data collection and analysis.

Central to the Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning are partnerships with teams of external evaluation professionals. This case story concentrates on the function and value of those partnerships and is divided into three parts. First, we provide background about the Foundation's programming, approach to evaluation and learning, and relevant trends in evaluation and philanthropy that align with the Foundation's approach. Next, we explore what we learned through the interviews and surveys about how the Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning and collaboration with partners have informed the strategic direction of the Foundation's work. At the end, we offer our conclusions based on the totality of data collected and analyzed, which were identified in collaboration with the Office of Evaluation.[3]

We hope that documenting this story facilitates transparency and reflective discussion internally about the Foundation's evaluation and learning approach and role of its partners.

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[1] More information about the Foundation's mission, Just Imperative, and connection between the Foundation's values and evaluation are available at https://www.macfound.org/about/, https://www.macfound.org/about/how-we-work/just-imperative/, https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/living-our-values-through-evaluation/

[2] The Foundation's evaluation and learning partners currently include EDC, EnCompass, FSG, Grassroots Solutions in collaboration with M+R Strategic Services, NPC, ORS Impact, and Social Policy Research Associates.

[3] The development of this case story was a collaborative effort between the Foundation's Office of Evaluation and its evaluation and learning partners. Lynne Franco (EnCompass), Lindsay Hanson (Grassroots Solutions), and Hallie Preskill (FSG) led data collection, analysis, writing, and editing. The Office of Evaluation provided support, and all Foundation's evaluation and learning partners contributed, including the following individuals: Verenice Chavoya, Alex Chew, Rachel Estrella, Zachariah Falconer-Stout, Lynne Franco, Tori Fukumitsu, Anne Gienapp, Leslie Goodyear, Lindsay Hanson, Adele Harmer, Christina Kuo, Plum Lomax, Aditi Luminet, Caitlin McConnico, Tom Novick, Hallie Preskill, David Pritchard, and Erin Stafford.

1 Relevant Background

The Foundation's Programmatic Areas and Dynamic Strategies

The MacArthur Foundation has deliberately identified four programmatic areas of work.[4] Each has a different purpose and focus:

1 **Big Bets** have a goal of impact with a time-limited, achievable solution to a problem
2 **Enduring Commitments** support an ideal or value with a goal of long-term investment and progress
3 **Field Support** aims to create knowledge and structures to build a sector
4 **Awards and Special Projects** recognize distinctive individual and institutional creativity

Strategies for each of the Foundation's programmatic areas are tailored to the focus and purpose of each one. They are dynamic and reflect what is referred to internally as a "Design/Build" orientation.[5] That is, the Foundation recognizes that its strategies can and should evolve along with the context and environment in which they operate. Each program team develops a theory of change designed to draw out and make explicit their thinking, ideas, assumptions, and expectations. These theories of change are not static. While program teams hold their goals constant—meaning the thing they ultimately want to achieve never changes—how teams work toward their goals can and must be adjusted in response to changes in the landscape, feedback from grantees and partners, evaluation data, and other evidence.

Furthermore, the Foundation seeks to learn whether its strategies are producing significant results or meaningful contributions. What is learned informs programmatic choices as a strategy is implemented. Strategy reviews with the Board of Directors serve a more formal institutional purpose of checking in against time-bound intended impacts (as in the case of Big Bets) or against goals and specified outcomes (as in the case of the Foundation's Enduring Commitments). This dynamism, grounded in learning and feedback, is intended to make the Foundation's work more responsive to needs in the field, the perspectives of grantees, and those most affected by the Foundation's funding.

Approach to Evaluation and Learning: Grounded in Values

Evidence of results and feedback from a variety of sources help the Foundation to make informed decisions and "live its values." The Foundation operates from the position that as a philanthropic organization, it cannot

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4 More details about the MacArthur Foundation's programmatic areas are available at https://www.macfound.org/our-work/

5 Design/Build is a term that comes from the fields of architecture and construction where members of a project team collaborate early to address issues of cost, constructability, and schedule. Then the project team continually iterates between the designing and building processes.

possibly have all the answers, nor ask all the right questions, about how to best use its resources to promote its mission and values. Staff recognize the power and privilege they have as agents of the Foundation and therefore try to hold themselves consistently accountable for the actions they take. From the initial design of a program area or strategy, to strategy reviews with the Board of Directors, the Foundation solicits input from a diversity of perspectives and sources, using a variety of methods, to situate its work within the larger contexts. In so doing, Foundation staff strive to ensure that grantmaking activities and other programmatic work are meeting needs, adding value, and contributing to significant, positive, and meaningful change in the world.

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> MOST IMPORTANT, [THE EVALUATION AND LEARNING PARTNERS'] ROLE IS TO CONSTANTLY PROMPT US TO CHALLENGE OUR ASSUMPTIONS, AND TO NOT LET US FALL IN LOVE WITH WHAT WE DECIDED TO DO. "
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> —Julia Stasch,
> former president of the MacArthur Foundation, as published in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* in August 2019

One of the ways in which the Foundation seeks evidence of results, information about the landscape, and feedback is through the work of evaluation and learning partners. They help facilitate learning and provide data to challenge assumptions and to guide strategic choices. Each partnership is composed of a team of external evaluation professionals commissioned to provide evidence and serve as critical friends—separate but invested in—helping program teams learn how to implement their strategies most effectively. The Foundation selects evaluation and learning partners that are culturally competent and technically expert in mixed-methods evaluation, have a strong track record of managing complex projects, and are agile facilitators who are capable of communicating nuanced findings from evaluation data so that program staff, leadership, and the Board of Directors can use them to enhance their strategic thinking. To date, seven program teams representing the Foundation's Big Bets, Enduring Commitments, and Field Support have worked with evaluation and learning partners to articulate rigorous theories of change and corresponding evaluation and learning frameworks.

Also, each partner must embrace an engagement style that is common to developmental evaluation. Characteristics of that style include frequent, substantive touchpoints with Foundation staff, being responsive to program team requests for information, and the ability to offer actionable findings. The Foundation seeks diversity in its evaluation and learning partners, which it believes is essential to evaluation rigor, fulfilling the Foundation's Just Imperative goals, and creating more meaningful and lasting learning processes and experiences.[6]

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[6] More specifically, the Foundation values diversity of national origin, language, race, color, disability, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, educational background, family structures, and more. Additional details about the Foundation's use of external partners for evaluation and how it selects partners is available here: https://www.macfound.org/press/perspectives/critical-friends-using-external-partners-evaluation/

Program teams' experiences working with evaluation and learning partners range in duration. Some program teams have worked with a partner for as long as five years. Other partnerships are newer and as short as six months. Some program teams have changed evaluation and learning partners. Thus, some partnerships are well developed, and others are still in the early stages. In all cases, the Office of Evaluation staff serve as the liaison and bridge between the program teams and their evaluation and learning partners. In that role, Office of Evaluation staff help clarify (or acknowledge the emerging state of) institutional priorities and expectations, manage internal workplace and power dynamics, translate evaluation terminology or concepts when needed, help work through methodological questions, and troubleshoot challenges with data collection and analysis.

With oversight by the Office of Evaluation, evaluation and learning partners are encouraged to ask challenging questions to spur reflection and provide spaces for occasionally uncomfortable conversations. The Foundation believes that healthy tensions result in greater impact, intellectual honesty, and transparency in decision-making. The Office of Evaluation supports evaluation and learning partners to navigate balances between:

❚ Rigorous measurement and rapid learning

❚ Inclusivity and impartiality

❚ Collaboration and ensuring an external perspective

❚ Using numerical data (quantitative information) and narrative data and stories (qualitative information)

❚ Transparency and fairness, sharing information about the work but avoiding unintentionally favoring or bringing harm to grantees and others involved

❚ Designing dynamic strategy and establishing a comprehensive evaluation design

Alignment Between the Foundation's Approach and Trends in the Field

It is worth acknowledging that the MacArthur Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning is still relatively new and evolving. In 2014, the Foundation decided to work primarily through programs and projects that are larger in scale, time-limited in nature, or designed to reach specific goals. A choice was made to place less emphasis on program areas with an indefinite lifespan. With that in mind, the Foundation sought an approach to evaluation that reflected this pivot and would facilitate strategic learning over time.

The Foundation's choice to employ this approach to evaluation and learning is aligned with key aspects of developmental evaluation and consistent with increasing attention in philanthropy devoted to the intersection of strategy, learning, and evaluation. For example, strategy informs what is evaluated, and evaluation informs how strategy is developed and implemented *(Holley & Carr, 2014; Patrizi, Thompson, Coffman, & Beer, 2013; Patrizi & Patton, 2010; Patton, 2011; Preskill & Beer, 2012)*. Moreover, strategic learning is a key mechanism through which foundations can strengthen their ability to adapt and support social change. Patrizi, Heid

Thompson, Coffman, & Beer (2013) point out that for complex environments and complex problems, "learning is strategy." [7]

Activities undertaken by evaluation and learning partners are focused on the strategy level as opposed to evaluating individual grantees or projects. The MacArthur Foundation sought an evaluation approach that embraced the ways that strategy and evaluation are mutually reinforcing, would facilitate learning, and is grounded in its values. The approach adopted is a departure from traditional evaluation in that more responsibility rests on the Foundation to make its thinking and strategic choices visible and create space for criticism and challenges to its assumptions and strategy choices from a range of perspectives (e.g., grantees and others). In employing this approach, the MacArthur Foundation aims to place less burden on grantees within a grant or grant project while striving to ensure that grantees have input into the strategy and an opportunity to facilitate interpretation and use of the information from the evaluation.

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[7] Other publications and resources on the subject include: GEO's Learning in Philanthropy: A Guidebook; a recent issue of Foundation Review; FSG's Guide to Facilitating Intentional Group Learning and Engaging Boards and Trustees in Strategic Learning: A Toolkit; The Center for Evaluation Innovation's blog posts: Realigning Evaluation Trustees to Incentivize Learning; Better, Faster, Results – Supporting Learning for Multiple Audiences; GEO's bi-annual Learning Conference; and, Building Principle-Based Strategic Learning: Insights From Practice, which appeared in the Foundation Review in March of 2019.

2   Findings About the Foundation's Approach

With that background in mind, in this section we explore what we learned through the interviews and surveys about the Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning, and its engagement of evaluation learning partners. Four main themes, two related to evaluation functions and two related to process, emerged from our analysis of the data collected and analyzed:

1   Value of Theory of Change and Evaluation Design Processes

2   Usefulness of Evaluation Data to Inform Strategy

3   Nature of Relationships with Partners to Facilitate Learning Over Time

4   Broader Information-sharing and the Evaluation and Learning Partner Community of Practice

Where appropriate, we have tried to connect how these findings are situated within a broader conversation about strategy, evaluation, and learning within philanthropy.

Value of Theory of Change and Evaluation Design Processes

Theory of change and evaluation design processes facilitated by evaluation and learning partners have provided beneficial and consistent grounding for the Foundation's programmatic areas. Program teams, the Office of Evaluation, senior leadership, and evaluation and learning partners agreed that the resulting theories of change in visual and narrative forms are helping the Foundation hold itself accountable to its grantees, the field, and the Just Imperative. They have also served as useful reference tools for new staff members and aided ongoing reflection with grantees about progress and the relevance of programmatic strategies.

> " IT'S... CREATED A CONSISTENCY. AN EXPECTATION THAT ALL TEAMS GOING THROUGH THE SAME PROCESS. EACH WILL HAVE ITS OWN FLAVOR. BUT IN THEORETICAL DESIGN, INTENDED TO BE A WAY TO HELP INFORM DECISION-MAKING BASED ON A CONSISTENT APPROACH AND SET OF FACTS THAT ARE RELEVANT TO EACH TEAM. "

There was consensus among Foundation staff interviewed that evaluation and learning partners have pressed program teams to articulate more clearly what they thought success would look like and how to achieve it. Although each programmatic area is different, the design processes have all included activities to clarify timelines to achieve desired results, assumptions that underpin each program's strategy to test, and program teams' and their partners' learning priorities. Program teams are at different stages in their collaborations with evaluation and learning partners, but most have developed or are implementing corresponding evaluation and learning frameworks to assess their theories of change. These frameworks detail measures, analytical

methods, and data collection activities. Furthermore, they guide activities to establish baselines, measure progress toward the Foundation's desired near-term outcomes and longer-term impacts, assess the Foundation's contribution, track changes in the landscape that could help or hinder progress, and answer learning questions identified by program teams (often in conjunction with grantees and other stakeholders).

Although the processes to develop these theories of change and corresponding evaluation frameworks took substantial time and institutional commitment, there was widespread agreement that the investments were ultimately worthwhile. Developing theories of change and related evaluation frameworks or plans for each programmatic area (which often included articulating additional theories of change for subsets for various portfolios) was not a brief exercise or without challenges. For most of the teams, the process of getting to a fully developed theory of change ranged from several months to two years; involved program teams, grantees (or subsets of grantees), advisors, and others participating in several in-person and phone meetings; and multiple iterations. At the same time, program team members interviewed noted that these processes helped them "bring the story [of their program] together" and be more transparent with grantees and other partners about the origins of programmatic strategies, what program staff were confident about, vulnerabilities, trade-offs and the degree to which equity is prioritized in the strategy.[8] For program team members who joined the MacArthur Foundation after these processes were completed, the theories of change and corresponding evaluation frameworks were especially useful in their training and onboarding. They described the outputs of those processes as "very educational" and one went so far as to remark, "I wonder how I would have settled into the team without that exercise."

8   Data from a survey by the Center for Effective Philanthropy in 2019 corroborated program teams' perceptions. Compared to 2016, respondents indicated a significant increase in grantees perceptions of how clearly the Foundation communicated its goals and strategy, which correlated with changes in its approach to funding and the adoption of a new approach to evaluation and learning. Data from 2016 indicated a weighted score of 5.52. In 2019, Big Bets scored 5.83 and Enduring Commitments 5.75.

Although time and labor intensive, the MacArthur Foundation's evaluation and learning partners universally described the processes to develop theories of change and evaluation frameworks as critical to establishing mutual respect and trust with program teams. And this trust became foundational for effective evaluation activities and learning later. Not all program team staff were equally receptive to the participatory nature of those processes or were sure what having a "critical friend" facilitating those processes would mean in practice. However, as those processes unfolded, evaluation and learning partners observed that program teams had more opportunities to see their partners' commitment to, and nuanced understanding of, their work. Furthermore, the theory of change and evaluation design processes laid the groundwork for more meaningful reflection about data collected, tracked, and analyzed later.

Finally, during the theory of change and evaluation design processes, evaluation and learning partners tried different facilitation approaches, meeting times, and design session formats. Some facilitation approaches worked well, and some were less fruitful. Some teams appreciated small-group work. Others preferred to discuss everything in a large-group format. Evaluation and learning partners were able to adjust how long meetings were, what kind of preparatory effort was required, and determined how best to involve and engage various members of each program team. That period at the outset of the partnership was critical to building program teams' confidence and trust in their evaluation and learning partners' engagement with grantees, letting program teams know that they were heard, and partners respect program teams' preferences and processes. The work during this period helped ensure that the data collected and analyzed would be useful later. This last point is explored further in the next finding.

Other funders—Colorado Health Foundation, Ford Foundation, Episcopal Health Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, Hilton Foundation, Kresge Foundation, McKnight Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and others—have shared similar views about the value of theories of change to facilitate strategic learning. They have written about the importance of theories of change as a means for articulating assumptions, clarifying strategy, surfacing questions, and communicating desired short, intermediate, and long-term change with grantees. Sometimes processes to develop theories of change have included seeking grantee input at various stages. In other instances, grantees have co-created theories of change with funders and then used them as a tool for co-learning about a strategy's progress and outcomes.

For example, representatives of the Colorado Health Foundation, Kresge Foundation, and Episcopal Health Foundation described theories of change "...as representations of the foundation's current thinking about how to create change, not as plans of action or representations of the 'right answer' about how to achieve impact. This positions them as tools for strategic learning; they contain hypotheses that can be tested and informed by a range of evidence, and they are documents we return to regularly as we assess what we are learning and refine our strategies" *(Price, Reid & Kennedy Leahy, 2019)*.

Usefulness of Evaluation Data to Inform Strategy

Program teams and senior leadership reported that evaluation data have been important—complemented by other research and insights from grantees and advisors—in informing ongoing decisions about programmatic strategy. Evaluation and learning partners have presented data in a variety of ways to support strategic decisions in as close to "real time" as possible. Evaluation data, products, and learning experiences facilitated by evaluation and learning partners have also served as crucial inputs to strategy reviews with the Board of Directors.

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>
> THE EVALUATIONS I HAVE PARTICIPATED IN IN THE PAST HAVE ALL BEEN RETROACTIVE, THIS IS NEW. AS THEY SHARE DATA WITH US, WILL TRY TO WORK INTO STRATEGY REFINEMENT CONTINUOUSLY."

Program staff observed that the usefulness of evaluation data and work with evaluation and learning partners to facilitate real-time learning generally increased over time. They routinely described that at the outset of their relationships with evaluation and learning partners, the engagement was more about providing partners with feedback and information that would lay the groundwork for data collection. Although to be expected that it would take some time for evaluation and learning partners to get up to speed on each strategy, and for Foundation staff to adapt to working with an evaluation partner, there was a period of adjustment that was at times frustrating for program teams. Once the processes to clarify theories of change and develop evaluation frameworks were completed, the role of the evaluation and learning partners evolved. Program teams shifted to "absorb mode and learning." One program team member interviewed put it this way: "In the beginning, the time and financial commitment seem... overwhelming, but over time, the benefits become very clear."

In the interviews, program teams provided a wide array of examples of how evaluation data collected, tracked, analyzed, and reported by evaluation and learning partners have informed ongoing strategy adjustments and decisions. Examples of using data and evidence in real time included:

❚ Modifying resource allocation within a portfolio, such as groups to fund, where to fund, and at what level (e.g., international, national, subnational)

❚ Working with grantees to modify how clusters of activities were unfolding (e.g., deprioritizing or expanding some activities or solutions promoted)

❚ Identifying and responding rapidly to challenges or opportunities in the landscape

❚ Choosing when to stay the course rather than pivoting

- Providing resources or support—often beyond grantmaking—to bolster capacities of grantees to fill gaps impeding progress
- Leveraging convening or reputational power to foster broader information-sharing
- Clarifying how programmatic strategy supports the Foundation's Just Imperative

Staff from one program team reported that evaluation data helped them realize they were focusing on the wrong thing to assess progress and concurrently needed to support some additional capacity-building among grantees to advance the theory of change more effectively.

Another program team used evaluation data and quarterly status updates from their evaluation and learning partner to make strategic adjustments. Evaluation data helped the program team better understand messages and message frames that appeal to politically conservative groups in the U.S. and then provided grants to organizations well positioned to engage conservatives around energy policy reforms. In addition, the program team adjusted its grantmaking in India in response to the air pollution crisis to make further inroads with policymakers around the topic of air quality to promote climate solutions.

In addition, evaluation data were described by Foundation staff interviewed as "crucial" to informing strategy reviews. As previously mentioned, strategy reviews serve a more formal institutional purpose of checking in against time-bound intended impacts (e.g., in the case of Big Bets) or against goals and specified outcomes (e.g., in the case of the Foundation's Enduring Commitments). Members of the program teams interviewed, as well as senior leadership, described evaluation data, reporting, and associated reflective conversations as valuable inputs to make evidence-based decisions about the Foundation's programmatic strategies with the Board of Directors. For example, one of the program teams used evaluation data—in conjunction with other research and insights—to make significant refinements to their strategy, adapting to what was learned about racial and ethnic disparities in their work. Another program team proposed some pivots to the Board of Directors and winding down grantmaking in certain areas based on data and reporting from their evaluation and learning. Across all programmatic areas, evaluation data are helping to inform conversations as part of the strategy reviews about diversity, equity, and inclusion and how the Just Imperative connects to each theory of change.

Among evaluation and learning partners interviewed, the experience preparing for the strategy reviews highlighted the importance of previous relationship building with program teams. The nature of the

> "It's almost like we'd be flying blind if we didn't have the evaluation and learning partner process... It's been integral... Data collection has informed some changes to the strategy. Racial equity work, in particular. Findings of evaluation process helped to pull out. Done in a way that was trusted and helpful."

> "In one case we've decided to exit, which is difficult... But it's grounded in data and it's not arbitrary. The data grounds the decision and not based on personal whim."

> "In... strategy reviews we've had, been able to enact a process with rigor and credibility. Shared with the Board and ourselves, this [aspect of a programmatic area] had less success and here's why. Gives us a whole new way to talk about how to change a strategy when we have those actual results we've been briefed on together."

> "How do you hold a balance of learning... versus the flavor of accountability... How do you resolve that tension and keep a healthy balance? How we respond, what that looks like... We're still living it."

partnerships and trust established correlated with the uptake of evaluation data to inform decision-making over time. One evaluation and learning partner described the preparations for the strategy reviews as collaborative, characterized by careful listening, and illustrative of partners' "critical friend" role. They went on to note that program team members engaged in the substance of the evaluation findings, "which didn't mean just accepting them at face value, but neither did they reject the uncomfortable findings. The resulting proposal for revising the strategy was evidence-based, and it felt like the proposal responded to the evaluation... we could see clearly their uptake of evaluation findings, and careful use of them." It is important to note that evaluation products and presentations often went through several iterations over periods of months before they were finalized. Evaluation and learning partners cited challenges determining the right level of information and formats to present data for the program teams and Board of Directors, as the Foundation staff were learning what they wanted and needed.

Also, while not universally mentioned in the interviews and small-group discussions, several Foundation staff reported tensions balancing the need for data to inform ongoing decision-making and the desire for rigor to facilitate meaningful conversations with the Board of Directors as part of the strategy reviews. They acknowledged the value of having credible information that often require longer timeframes for data collection and analysis. At the same time, they crave closer to "real-time" data and insights to foster ongoing strategic adjustments. Foundation staff and evaluation and learning partners alike cited challenges navigating the appropriate balance between accountability and having real-time data to foster rapid learning. Most Foundation staff observed that it is important to document the programmatic work being undertaken and communicate that with grantees, understand and track progress, and to the extent possible, be positioned to reflect on the contribution of the Foundation's work with a variety of audiences. Also, leveraging data to inform ongoing adjustments is especially meaningful to program teams. These observations were linked to questions some Foundation staff raised about trade-

offs and competition in terms of time and energy between efforts to support a strategy review and ongoing learning and refinement.

Balancing real-time learning and desire for rigor and accountability that longer term data collection and analysis processes afford are not unique to the MacArthur Foundation. Evaluations commissioned by funders often involve stakeholders and audiences with varying learning priorities, availability to participate in evaluation and learning activities, and timeline considerations. The challenge of balancing peoples' intellectual energies, capacity, deadlines, and requests or expectations from leadership and Board members is one that is evergreen in the evaluation field. In addition, data collected and analyzed often serve different purposes and have different cadences. For example, if an evaluation primarily serves ongoing decision-making purposes, the tempo of the evaluation has a certain pace. If the primary purpose is to make rigorous summative judgments for accountability purposes, the tempo is quite different, and the data may have a different look and feel to them. Evaluation and learning partners cited challenges in designing evaluation and learning frameworks that served multiple, possibly competing, purposes.

Nature of Relationships with Partners to Facilitate Learning Over Time

There was consensus among all respondents that the nature of the relationships evaluation and learning partners have with the program teams and Office of Evaluation create space over time for regular group reflection that enables learning and provides flexibility to meet the Foundation's evolving information needs.

" WE ARE BENEFITING FROM... LEARNING ON AN ONGOING BASIS. BUT LEARNING ISN'T REALLY TIED TO PARTICULAR PRODUCTS, IT REALLY IS MUCH MORE OF A PROCESS. IT'S MUCH MORE OF A REAL-TIME FLOW OF INFORMATION. "

WHERE I FIND THE MOST BENEFIT HAS BEEN IN THOSE REFLECTIVE CONVERSATIONS AND... QUARTERLY MEETINGS. "

Program teams emphasized the value of having regular touch points with evaluation partners and the Office of Evaluation to facilitate learning. These touch points have helped program teams assess emergent challenges and opportunities that could affect their strategies. They noted that learning is as much about the process as the products created (e.g., theories of change, reports, dashboards, visuals, memos, etc.). Program teams described the meaningful spaces created by monthly or quarterly meetings, check-ins, status updates, annual retreats, convenings with grantees, webinars, and other in-person or virtual meetings facilitated by evaluation and learning partners to grapple with topics ranging from changes in the landscape to advancing equity and the Foundation's Just Imperative.

The nature and duration of the Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning allow partners more opportunities to experiment with facilitation techniques, make adjustments

to meeting agendas to address different learning styles, and be more responsive to evolving information needs of the program teams. And this ability to experiment and adjust in turn is integral to a successful partnership. One program team described experimentation with meeting facilitation and ways of communicating this way: "[The evaluation and learning partner is] responsive to our feedback... in every conversation with them is always, 'What don't you like?' 'What do you want to see change?' Always see that subsequent consultations will reflect feedback. Think quality of work has improved because of feedback."

In addition, the nature and duration of the evaluation and learning partnerships have other advantages, including flexibility. Multiple evaluation and learning partners and program teams interviewed described adjusting data collection methods, doing additional data collection, or changing how data are presented to address the Foundation's evolving information needs. For example, one program team said it was helpful to have the support of the evaluation and learning partner to conduct an unplanned survey of a group of stakeholders because the team was able to "analyze the pros and cons of the different kind of support they were receiving from the intermediary grantees. We appreciate the flexibility of this, and while it's not a decision point, it has aided decision-making around grantmaking." That program team wanted the feedback from stakeholders to help them better support grantees.

Lastly, the nature and duration of evaluation and learning partnerships have helped foster more transparency and co-learning with grantees through web conferences, annual in-person convenings, and other formats. Through regular surveys, grantees have reported familiarity with each programmatic area's theory of change, its purpose, and measurement. Evaluation and learning partners have helped facilitate reflective conversations with grantees about evaluation findings, what is working, what is not, how activities are unfolding, and what other support is needed. For example, in late 2019, one program team convened grantees in India to identify ambitious yet realistic milestones, how civil society could play a role, and what the grantees could achieve together. Information coming out of that convening is informing refinements to the Foundation's targets and desired outcomes. In another instance, at a meeting with grantees, another evaluation and learning partner described sharing data and findings related to one component of the strategy. The partner reported that grantees largely affirmed the findings and insights and expressed appreciation for the discussion, which sought to surface future opportunities for the strategic approach. A third evaluation and learning partner described facilitating a sense-making session with grantees, bringing together data from surveys and interviews and using that data to ground a conversation about progress toward desired outcomes, where grantees are facing challenges due to changes in contexts, and what the program team could be doing differently to support them, particularly when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The partner reported that the program team, "used the evaluation data to discuss expectations [with grantees] for their work and strategic implications for the coming year..."

Learning has been defined as the means for "creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge" *(Garvin, 1993)*. While many have advocated the importance of being a learning organization *(Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990)*, there is a deepening interest among foundations to ensure that organizational learning is taking place, and ideally, with grantees and other partners. Furthermore, organizations that commit to an "intentional use of learning processes at the individual, group, and system level to continuously transform the organization in a direction that is increasingly satisfying to its stakeholders" are better positioned to be effective in their pursuit of social change *(Dixon, 1994)*.

Broader Information-Sharing and the Evaluation and Learning Partner Community of Practice

An unanticipated outgrowth of the Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning partnerships is a community of practice that has emerged among the Foundation's partners and broader information-sharing.

In 2018, the Office of Evaluation brought its evaluation and learning partners together over two days so that they could: 1) share experiences and lessons learned with each other, and 2) introduce their work to all the program teams. In 2019, the Office of Evaluation again convened evaluation and learning partners, which provided them with the opportunity to meet the Foundation's new President, John Palfrey. Beyond the convenings, the Office of Evaluation has facilitated sharing various evaluation management tools and reports among evaluation and learning partners so that they can learn from each other. The Foundation's evaluation and learning partners found the initial convening so worthwhile that they decided to stay connected, by engaging in a "community of practice" that has met monthly for nearly two years.

During these monthly self-organized meetings, the evaluation and learning partners have developed a series of joint projects, discussed techniques and approaches used with each program team, tested ideas, helped each other prepare to present evaluation frameworks and data, and navigate challenges. What began as an idea to bring the evaluation and learning partners together and share their work with Foundation staff grew into an important dimension of the Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning. Partners were unanimous in their opinion that the community of practice has helped them better meet the information needs of each program team, adjust approaches to data collection and analysis, find efficiencies and avoid reinventing the wheel, and improve the quality and consistency of reporting. The relationships among evaluation and learning partners, with continuing support and thought partnership from the Office of Evaluation, have been

As foundations seek to adopt a learning orientation *(Coffman & Beer, 2011)* and embrace the relationship between strategy and evaluation, they are experimenting with approaches like developmental evaluation. Characteristics of developmental evaluation include, but are not limited to, the following:

- An emphasis on understanding innovation in context and frequent opportunities for stakeholder engagement *(Patton, 2011)*

- Cultivating internal learning champions *(Clarke, Preskill, Stevenson, & Schwartz, 2019; Preskill & Carr, July 14, 2019)*

- Developing grantee communities of practice *(Wenger, 2012; Mt. Auburn Associates, Inc., 2015)*

- Establishing long-term evaluation and learning partnerships *(de Garcia & Frischknecht, 2018)*

particularly meaningful in preparations for strategy reviews with the Board of Directors.

The evaluation and learning partner community of practice has been especially relevant because all partners are implementing developmental evaluations. Although each evaluation framework is tailored to the learning priorities for each program, most partners have worked with their program teams for multiple years, and the Foundation has developed a structure and set of practices that evaluation and learning partners follow. These commonalities have created opportunities for sharing successes and challenges in a respectful, candid, and forward-looking way. An unintended benefit of the Foundation's approach has been that evaluation and learning partners are not only developing long and trusting relationships with their program teams, but they are also strengthening their relationships with each other.

Stronger relationships among evaluation and learning partners are significant in a broader context because funders and evaluators have acknowledged that evaluation and learning in philanthropy can be limited in ways that impede deeper resonance and impact. For example, "...demand for evaluation has fueled competition among evaluators, which can impede collaboration and knowledge sharing with potential to advance shared capacity across practicing evaluators. Funders, too, may withhold information or be reluctant to share lessons learned from their own evaluation experiences so as not to privilege or provide 'inside' information to contractors" *(Nolan, Long & Pérez, 2019)*. The MacArthur Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning and nurturing information and collaboration among the partners is an illustration of a way evaluators and funders are working to strengthen evaluation practice and its usefulness to inform philanthropic learning and strategy. Convening evaluation and learning partners and encouraging the community of practice has helped challenge the notion of competition among evaluators and break down barriers to information-sharing which have the potential to improve results for the both the MacArthur Foundation and the field.

3 Conclusions and Questions for Consideration

The findings from our data collection and analysis suggest that the MacArthur Foundation's journey to implement an approach to evaluation and learning is positive, evolving, but not without inherent tensions. Key aspects of that approach have helped the Foundation challenge its assumptions, facilitate learning, and provide actionable data to inform strategic decision-making. Recognizing that each programmatic area is unique, strengths of the Foundation's approach that were cited regularly by Foundation staff and evaluation partners and are worth underscoring include:

- **The approach is grounded in values and evaluation principles.** The Foundation's evaluation and learning partnerships align with its values and commitment to practicing evaluation that is transparent, rigorous, ethical, and learning-focused.

- **The approach fosters trust and respect needed for effective uptake of evaluation evidence.** Evaluation is only as effective as the credibility the user assigns it, and the value they see in using data collected and analyzed to inform decisions. The trust developed among most program teams, the Office of Evaluation, and evaluation and learning partners have helped ensure that evaluation activities address real-time learning questions and longer-term information needs of program staff, senior leadership, and grantees.

- **Efficiency and effectiveness are gained over time through partnerships and strategy-level focus, but relationship building is not linear and takes time.** For program teams, collaborating with an evaluation and learning partner means spending less time and energy onboarding multiple evaluators to do one-off, project-focused evaluations where it is harder to see how the whole adds up to something greater than the sum of its parts. And strong relationships, which help create clearer understanding among the program teams and evaluation and learning partners, can make the work more focused and efficient.

At the same time, there are challenges associated with adopting the Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning and it is not necessarily the right fit for all funders or in all cases. A summary of important challenges highlighted in the findings include:

- **The collaborative nature of evaluation and learning partnerships require program and Office of Evaluation staff time and intellectual energy.** Committing the time needed for designing theories of change, developing evaluation and learning frameworks, engaging in reflective conversations with grantees and other stakeholders, reviewing documents, and engaging in sense-making sessions all require significant amounts of time from already busy program teams and other Foundation staff. How to "right-size" the time commitments from staff is a topic of ongoing discussion.

Also, trust among program teams and evaluation and learning partners takes time to develop. Currently, Office of Evaluation staff play an integral role in bridging demands on program staff and other Foundation interests with the evaluation and learning partners. They act as translators, guides, and critical thought partners to support evaluation and learning partners as they navigate this challenge, do their best work, and understand when to speed up slow down.

▌ **Managing the tension between rapid learning and information needs that are dependent on data that takes longer to collect, analyze, and report.** A critical role of evaluation and learning partners is to provide the kind of rigorous evidence related to the effectiveness and appropriateness of the strategy, which often requires a longer time horizon for data collection and analysis. This is sometimes in tension with an equally critical need for real-time information. This tension is not a problem to be solved; rather, it is a tension to be navigated, making the necessary trade-offs in thoughtful and transparent ways.

Looking ahead, potential questions for consideration about the Foundation's approach to evaluation and learning include but are not limited to, the following:

▌ Besides those cited, what are other strengths of this approach that the Foundation can build on? How can certain aspects of the approach be improved or streamlined?

▌ What types of evaluators/evaluation firms are best suited to design and conduct developmental or responsive evaluations? What dispositions and competencies do they need? How will the Foundation find evaluators who can do this type of work? To what extent do its current evaluators possess these competencies and values?

▌ What will it take to support evaluation and learning in the future? How might the approach evolve to better meet the needs of program teams, the Board of Directors, and grantees and reflect the values of the Just Imperative?

▌ Who are the end-users of evaluation and how best can the Foundation give back to grantees and other stakeholders something that results from this process? What is the responsibility of the Foundation in taking and giving back to grantees?

▌ What investments can and should the Foundation make in evaluation in this next phase of its strategies?

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