

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Strategy

Comic Relief wants to know what difference our funding has helped to make. We want to be able to tell the public and our funding partners about the contribution our grants have made to changing people's lives: we want to know the types of changes that have happened as well as the scale of those changes, including the numbers of people that have been supported.

Equally, we are committed to learning from the work that we fund. We want to support grant holders, and collaborate with other funders and relevant stakeholders, to understand how and why change happens and how we can best support that. Understanding what works best, under what circumstances, will ensure that we all use our resources to the greatest possible effect.

This document provides an overview of our monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) strategy. More detailed information on our requirements for applicants and grant holders in terms of MEL, and practical guidance on how to address these requirements is provided separately.

1. Context and Drivers

As a funder that wants to make best use of the money we receive from the public and funding partners, we need to base what we do, and the choices we make about what to fund and how we can support grant holders, on learning and evidence. This evidence can either be our own or generated by others, and we will use it to look at how and why change happens, and how this change can be sustained. We also need to be able to synthesise information from our grant holders in a variety of ways, so that we can demonstrate to the public, our funding partners, and others what our funding has achieved. Equally, this synthesis supports our own learning and the work of our teams that deliver public awareness and education.

Our monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) strategy is also operating in a time of increasing demands for robust and rigorous evidence of change within the international development and UK charity sector, as well as public policy more generally. Lively debates exist about what constitutes good evidence and how to generate this in order to know 'what works'. Comic Relief does not specify the need for grant holders to use a particular type of monitoring, evaluation or learning methodology. However, we do believe that robust evidence about what has been achieved, and what works or not, is critical for achieving our mission of a just world free from poverty.

This drive for robust evidence includes not only the generation of new evidence, but also the synthesis, sharing and use of existing evidence about what works. These should both be used to support the design of new projects, as well as informing on-going project delivery. There is an increased emphasis on the need to ensure that a project's MEL design is appropriate and proportionate both to the questions which the project is seeking to answer, and the complexity and context of the project. There is also a continued focus on the need to ensure not just feedback from those benefitting from the work, but meaningful engagement and participation of those benefitting at all stages of the MEL cycle, from design through to the application and sharing of learning.

There is also an increasing recognition of a gap in capacity for MEL in the sector. Both the organisations delivering social change and those funding them are seeking to improve their own practice, in order to generate robust evidence about what works in creating social change, and to use findings in a timely and effective way. A range of initiatives have emerged that seek to address this gap both in the UK (the Inspiring

Impact Network for example) and internationally (the BOND Effectiveness Programme and Better Evaluation for example). There are also a number of initiatives aimed at supporting funders to be more open and transparent with their grants and funding data, such as 360Giving and IATI.

2. Strategy aims

In order to respond effectively to the context and drivers, we have framed our monitoring, evaluation and learning strategy around four aims.

2.1. Improve the quality of evidence about what is being achieved and what works in creating social change.

We see grant holders and people benefiting from the work as the principal drivers, owners and users of their own learning. Applicants and grant holders should take ownership of their MEL, and engage meaningfully with those benefitting from their work to ensure their MEL is truly meaningful and effective. We want to enable them to do this and do it well. This means ensuring those we support have the capacity to provide robust evidence of the difference they make, and of what works, to enable them to prove and improve their work. We will do this by providing guidance and the resources they need to improve their MEL design and capacity, and in some cases we will support them directly in doing this. We will support broader sector initiatives seeking to improve MEL practice across the sector, and also commission, support or fund relevant evaluations and initiatives to bring existing evidence together, or to gather new evidence about what works.

2.2. Demonstrate the difference our funding makes in order to celebrate achievements and support our fundraising

We are accountable to the public and other funding partners, and want to be able to tell them what changes their donations have contributed towards. We also want to ensure that grant holders are accountable to those benefiting from their work. For this reason, when we award a grant, we expect organisations to develop robust MEL frameworks to enable them to report back to all stakeholders on the difference they are making. We synthesise the data that grant holders give us from across all our funding. This provides an overall picture of what needs are being addressed, the numbers of people being helped and the changes that are occurring in their lives. We also commission our own evaluations when we need further evidence of the difference our funding makes.

2.3. Understand our effectiveness as a grant maker and improve how we help deliver change

We are committed to understanding how effectively we play our role as a grant maker. We want to ensure that our grant making and management is carried out in a way that most effectively supports those we fund to achieve change, and that is efficient and cost-effective. This includes the grant making and grant management processes we use and the types of funding and support we provide, as well as the ways in which we contribute to the process of creating social change. We will track performance against key metrics in a number of areas, work with other funders to share and learn from one another, and gather regular feedback from grant holders and other key stakeholders.

2.4. Collaborate with others to share and influence effective practice

We believe that everyone can contribute to generating and sharing evidence about what works. To this end, we are committed to supporting those grant holders, organisations and initiatives that are best placed to provide leadership on particular issues. Where we can clearly add value, we may take this lead ourselves. We will collaborate with others to ensure that evidence about creating social change, including syntheses of existing evidence, is shared and used effectively to inform the practices and policies of others. We will also work with others to support initiatives to improve MEL practice across the sector.

Figure 1: How Comic Relief will deliver this strategy

