Improve evidence use and M&E practices to increase SMO Initiative impact

Findings from the baseline study of the Learning and Knowledge Management Project (LKMP) show significant disparities between the Canadian Small and Medium Organizations (SMOs) and their local partners, supported under the SMOs for Impact and Innovation initiative. Access to evidence and training in Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) are key areas for improvement where the LKMP can act.

The Learning and Knowledge Management Project aims to improve research-based evidence use and the evaluation capacity of SMOs and their local partners

In 2022, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) contracted the Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP) to design and implement the Learning and Knowledge Management Project (LKMP).

The LKMP aims to help Canadian Small and Medium Organizations (SMOs) and their local partners—supported under the SMOs for Impact and Innovation initiative—improve their understanding and use of scientific evidence and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to in turn increase the impact of the projects they lead.

Methodology

PEP conducted a baseline study at the outset of the LKMP to understand the current status of research-based evidence use and M&E application among Canadian SMOs and their local partners. This survey was conducted online in English and French between July and August 2023. It received responses from 75 participants, representing 51 SMO-led projects, including Fund for Innovation and Transformation (FIT), and Development Impact Window (DIW) projects. The SMO-led projects involve Canadian SMO staff and local partner staff.

The survey response rate was 71%.

Based on findings from the [M&E] team, we realized perennial crop farming contributes to increased household incomes. Previously, trainings did not focus on perennial crop farming. After these research-based findings, we changed our implementation strategy to emphasize perennial care and management through curriculum changes and other pilot projects. – SMO staff member

Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown via Flickr
Key findings

Unequal access and use of research-based evidence and M&E practices

The majority of respondents use research-based evidence to design new projects (76%) and refine the implementation of ongoing projects (81%). In particular, they use evidence to improve gender equality strategies, strengthen interventions, boost training participation, and identify successful practices for replication and scaling.

However, Canadian SMO staff have more access to research-based evidence and feel more confident using it (81% and 75%, respectively) than local partners do (63% and 60%, respectively). Local partners tend to use evidence mostly in project design rather than for improving implementation.

Three quarters of respondents—Canadian SMOs and local partners equally—have access to M&E practice-enhancing recommendations; and 59% have undergone M&E training. **The majority (62.7%) of Canadian SMO staff report a strong grasp of M&E practices**, however, the majority of local partners (62.5%) report a basic or limited understanding. Furthermore, most M&E training took place more than two years ago and the majority of training lacked gender-specific content.

Focusing on Development Impact Window Projects

- **Gender-focused M&E:** The vast majority (91%) of projects have M&E plans in place that address gender analysis.
- **Questions of adaptability:** A third (33%) of the projects have not updated their M&E plans since inception.
- **Little use of rigorous approaches:** Just over half (52%) of the projects have conducted evaluations, of which
  - three quarters were outcome and process evaluations,
  - three quarters were conducted in-house,
  Furthermore, only 3% of the forthcoming evaluations have plans to utilize RAA.
- **Receptive to change but limited evidence use:** Most projects have modified their design and strategy based on beneficiary and stakeholder “on-ground” feedback rather than using external evaluations and scientific evidence.
- **Impact:** Projects improve living conditions and gender-related outcomes according to 83% of respondents.

This divide grows larger when looking at the use of Rigorous Analytical Approaches (RAA)\(^1\) for impact evaluation. Over two thirds (69%) of Canadian SMO members who are familiar with RAA have used these methods, but none of the local partners have (see chart, below).

Knowledge of experimental impact evaluations (such as randomised control trials) is mostly “basic” or “limited” for both groups. However, local partners seem to be more knowledgeable than Canadian SMO staff about non-experimental methods. Women’s understanding of rigorous analytical approaches trails that of men.

Both Canadian SMOs and local partners demonstrate high levels of stakeholder inclusion—from direct programme beneficiaries to policymakers—in the project planning and monitoring stages. However, stakeholder engagement diminishes when projects reach the evaluation phase.

We worked collaboratively with district officials, caregivers, teachers, and administrators. We conducted focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews with them to get feedback – Local partner staff member

Due to the [project] training and sensitizations conducted by community gender champions, we observed a reduction in gender-based violence as wives and husbands both participate in decision-making at the household level – SMO staff member

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\(^1\) Rigorous analytical approaches in evaluation encompass various methodologies, including experimental impact evaluations (Randomized Control Trials (RCTs)) and non-experimental impact evaluations. The latter include Difference in Difference, Propensity Score Matching, Regression Discontinuity, and Instrumental Variables, among others.
Recognitions

The Learning and Knowledge Management Project draws three key recommendations from the baseline study to improve the M&E capacity of the Canadian SMOs and the local partners. Through these, the LKMP aims to bridge the disparities between the two groups.

1. **Improve access to and use of Research-Based Evidence by sharing findings from impactful interventions and critical literature.**

   **Roadmap:**
   - The LKMP project can offer consolidated summaries of the most relevant papers related to the SMO Initiative areas of intervention to address the limited access local partners in the Global South have to academic journals.
   - **Provide a knowledge base of research-based evidence** by sharing the results from the impact evaluations of a select group of DIW (similar) projects.
   - **Provide actionable recommendations** along with the evaluations so that organizations, especially local partners, can quickly adapt to the new evidence.

2. **Offer tailored M&E training with a gender focus.**

   **Roadmap:**
   - The LKMP should design training modules that cater to the spectrum of M&E proficiency levels indicated in this study.
   - These modules should focus particularly on gender methodologies and tools, and address the gaps in understanding rigorous analytical approaches.
   - **Encourage hands-on experiences to practice translating theory to practice,** for example, in the planned LKMP impact evaluations.
   - **Provide mentorship** to steer organizations towards more rigorous, impact-centric evaluations.

3. **Encourage external evaluations and research-informed adjustments.**

   **Roadmap:**
   - GAC and the LKMP should encourage DIW projects to explore collaborations with research institutions that could offer impartial perspectives.
   - The LKMP should promote project adaptability with an evidence-backed foundation by advocating for project adjustments to be informed by research-based evidence along with beneficiary and stakeholder feedback.

Acknowledgements

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