Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation for Women's Rights:

Twelve Insights for Donors

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Between 2009 and mid-2010, AWID has been engaged in intensive research into the challenges of monitoring and evaluating the progress of women's rights work. This has combined desk and internet research of available secondary resources, direct surveys, in-depth interviews, and extensive face-to-face discussions with both donor agencies and women's organizations. We reviewed and analyzed a wide spectrum of current M&E frameworks, approaches, methods and tools (see "Capturing Change in Women's Realities"[1]), and conducted a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative study of the challenges faced by the organizations and networks that received MDG3 Fund grants.

This entire process has yielded a number of insights – some of them quite new – about how to develop more effective M&E systems for those engaged in women's rights and empowerment work at the grassroots, national, regional and global level. We were also pleased to note that several of these insights are endorsed by other recent work on social impact assessment by donors and development agencies[2,3]. We believe these can be useful to the larger community of donors who support gender equality work, and encourage you to also refer to the research and analysis from which these insights are drawn.

1. Make M&E a learning partnership, not a performance test
2. Approaches that include multiple M&E frameworks / tools / methods are more effective
3. Balance quantitative and qualitative assessment techniques
4. Legitimize and value participatory approaches
5. Track & assess reversals or even success in fiholding the linefl
6. Approaches that assess contribution to change are better than attribution-based frameworks
7. Make M&E systems flexible and adaptable
8. Design M&E to suit organizational architecture
9. Factor in organizational capacity when designing M&E
10. Invest resources in developing M&E capacity
11. Tailor indicators and results to time frames
12. Invest in the creation of baselines

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1. Batliwala and Pittman for AWID, 2010, "Capturing Change in Women's Realities: A Critical Overview of Current M&E Frameworks and Approaches"
2. See for instance Alnoor Ebrahim & V. Kasturi Rangan, 2010, "The Limits of Nonprofit Impact – A Contingency Framework for Measuring Social Performance", Harvard Business School Working Paper 10-099; and
3. See McKinsey & Company, 2010, "Learning for Social Impact – What Foundations Can Do", results of a study of "best practices" in social impact assessment.

1 The first and most important overarching lesson from AWID's research and conversations with both donors and women's organizations, and other recent work[4], is that results assessment is best achieved when it is approached as a learning enterprise for both donors and grantees. This involves something of a paradigm shift – viz., moving from the rather intimidating "prove that you did what you were supposed to" to a more collaborative "let's learn together how to alter the deeply embedded structures that discriminate against women". We realize that often, donors are themselves under pressure to show results, and are therefore forced to adopt stringent, rigid, or overly quantitative M&E. But the truth is that there are few, if any, tried and tested formulas in women's empowerment and rights work – the overwhelming evidence from around the world seems to be that even highly successful interventions can fail in other contexts, or even in the same context at a different point in time. Adopting a more collaborative approach to assessing the results and impacts, giving the lead in M&E design to grantee partners, and or subsidizing the cost of external M&E expertise where necessary, are all worth considering.

← **Make M&E a learning partnership, not a performance test!**

2 Our research indicates that no single M&E framework can capture all aspects of the change, impact, or results of a women's rights / empowerment project or strategy – in short, one size does not fit all! Because the nature of gender and social power relations is complex, embedded in multiple social, cultural, economic and political structures and institutions, single M&E instruments – such as the logical framework, theory of change, outcome mapping, or gender impact analysis – can assess **some** dimensions of the change process, but **not all**. Consequently, a comprehensive assessment process requires the application of multiple frameworks, methods and tools, working in a complementary fashion. AWID's compendium of M&E frameworks and approaches could serve as a helpful starting point for making these choices. Further, our critical analysis of a wide spectrum of M&E frameworks, approaches and tools shows that each of these have been designed to track or capture specific dimensions of change or operational effectiveness, and not others; so while one instrument cannot tell us the whole story, strategic and intelligent combinations can bring us much closer to a more comprehensive understanding of the change process, its gains and limitations

← **Approaches that include multiple M&E frameworks / tools / methods are more effective**

3 A corollary to the need for combining multiple approaches is the need to combine both quantitative and qualitative tools in an appropriate balance. There is a widespread belief, among women's rights activists and organizations, that donors prefer quantitative – or "hard" – evidence of results, rather than "soft" data that tends to appear "anecdotal" and hence not rigorous. In reality, though, the most complete picture of positive change – or of reversals or "holding the line" – emerges when quantitative and qualitative tools of assessment are **combined.** For example, a more complete picture of the impact of a women's empowerment project is likely to come from collecting data through quantitative instruments like surveys (which can establish changes in women's political participation, literacy, income, health-seeking behavior, increased use of condoms and declining rate of HIV infection, etc.), with ethnographic approaches that trace the factors that led to a change in attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of both target group women and men in their families and communities. It is the

← **Balance quantitative and qualitative assessment techniques**

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4. McKinsey 2010, ibid., p.4

latter that can help explain the former. An overemphasis on quantitative data actually *undermines* our ability to understand how change happened, and therefore, of how to make it happen more effectively.

4 In order to balance quantitative and qualitative evidence, it is important to give due weight to participatory tools and methods – such as women's narratives of change – rather than privileging so-called "objective" evidence alone. This is because no one can as accurately assess change in their situation as the women whose lives an intervention has sought to transform. Far from being merely anecdotal, these narratives and other participatory tools are often the most sensitive indicators of project impact. While it is true that these methods can be manipulated to present a rosy picture of achievement, the solution is not to dismiss them. In fact, even "hard" data can be manipulated to hide less flattering truths by highlighting some data and burying others – as in the case of the South Asian NGO who highlighted the survey finding that their micro-credit program had increased women's income by over 30% - but hid the fact that the drop-out rate from school among these women's daughters was equally high! As one MDG3 Fund grantee said, ***"the numbers aren't even half the story when comes to understanding and addressing INEQUALITY."***[5]

On the other hand, "stories of change" can present profound insights into how the change intervention is actually influencing gender and social relations in communities. The street-level interviews conducted by Breakthrough Trust, after their "Ring the Bell" campaign to raise public awareness about violence against women, present a compelling picture of how people are beginning to think differently about an issue that was always consigned to the private domain, or considered a part of male privilege. Another feminist NGO - CREA - finds it hard to demonstrate the impact of their grassroots women's leadership development program, but has gathered moving narratives from women of their courageous challenges to the status quo, such as defying the family and clan's norms to invite a Muslim friend to attend a Hindu religious festival. The point is to work with grantees to agree on how anecdotal evidence and information gleaned from participatory methods will be deployed so as to create a more nuanced and accurate image of what has been achieved.

5 M&E approaches that allow for tracking negative changes, resistance, and reversals, are essential in women's rights and empowerment work, since the overwhelming evidence from around the world suggests that most interventions that advance women's rights create reactions from the status quo that range from mild (cooption or neutralization) to aggressive (violence against women or the activists working with them). For example, in-depth assessment of micro-credit programs for women have found that measuring their results only in terms of loan disbursals and repayment rates, or even of increases in women's income, tells only one part of the story. Current assessment tools do not capture many negative impacts – such as increased violence against or exploitation of women who have gained new economic power, or that really impoverished women cannot participate in these programs at all. Designing instruments that pick up these negative effects is vital, since they may radically alter the assessment of a project's "success" or "failure", by placing achievements

← **Legitimize and value participatory approaches**

← **Track & assess reversals or even success in "holding the line"**

5. Batliwala & Pittman, "Learning More from the MDG3 Fund Experience", 2010, P.16

against a more realistic yardstick. In many cases, the negative reactions or reversals are actually evidence of positive impact. Similarly, we need approaches that give due value to projects that successfully "held the line" – i.e., holding on to past gains – such as preventing the repeal of a law entitling women access to abortion - rather than making new ones. Such "success" might be interpreted very differently if we know that the gains have been held in the face of strong efforts to negate them. As several participants in AWID's research said, signs of positive impact might simply be that "things haven't gotten worse"!

6 For all the above reasons, approaches that seek to *attribute* change (particularly positive change) to particular interventions or projects are quite problematic in the realm of gender equality and women's rights work. AWID's "Capturing Change" examines why this is so. We also find that attribution-based approaches like the logical framework are perfectly acceptable when tracking performance or implementation of project activities, but do not work as well when we are trying to understand how the change process produced intended – and unintended - results. They are also not designed to capture the *interim* goals that must be achieved in order to reach final intended outcomes. This results in the tendency to jump right to measuring the overall goal of a program which are achievable only in the longer term, and consequently, in measuring macro-indicators (like poverty rates, literacy rates, mortality rates, or other indicators) that go beyond the scope of a single program's sphere of influence or impact. So in developing the right "mix" of M&E instruments, it is advisable to ensure that longer-term and deeper shifts in gender relations, women's rights, and general empowerment are assessed using approaches that track the intervening organization's *contribution* to these shifts, rather than those that seek to claim the entire credit for the change, which is hard, if not impossible, to prove.

← Approaches that assess contribution to change are better than attribution-based frameworks

7 Rigid approaches that insist on the initially set out targets / indicators / outputs / outcomes are not useful in women's rights and empowerment work - they reflect the limited understanding of those imposing them, rather than the contextual realities in which such interventions are actually situated. But this is not a peculiarity of social change work – even major corporations and businesses have been forced to revise their targets and indicators when macro- economic and market realities change! A simple example is that of quantitative targets that might have been set at the beginning of the project, but the process of implementation shows that these were over-estimates – or under-estimates. The planned number of meetings for awareness-building of women's rights to freedom from violence, for instance, could not be held because the project has attracted negative political scrutiny, or its activists have had to go underground, or war has broken out, or men in the community have mobilized women against the project. The M&E indicators may quickly have to be revised, under these circumstances, to reflect what the project *was* able to do in response. A timely re-negotiation also ensures that indicators are not changed arbitrarily because the earlier ones reflected negatively on the organization's work, but because external factors have altered the change intervention's trajectory. The point is that M&E systems must be *agile and flexible*, since evidence shows that even the most carefully-chosen approaches and measures may have to be changed midstream if the ground-realities shift radically in the course of project implementation.

← Make M&E systems flexible and adaptable

8 The world of women's rights is increasingly populated by organizations with diverse and complex architectures – networks, local-to-global structures, federations and confederations, membership-based organizations, coalitions, etc. etc. These entities often gain donor support *because* of their architecture, which gives them a greater reach, bandwidth, and impact at multiple levels of policy and activism. Yet, when it comes to monitoring their work, assessing their results, or evaluating their impact, they are compelled to use M&E frameworks and tools that were designed for far simpler, grassroots-based, direct-action or service-delivery organizations. These tools ask questions like "how many women have you reached / benefitted?" which are almost impossible for multi-layered structures to answer – for example, the secretariat of a large, geographically dispersed network or coalition, with multiple organizations as members, is typically the recipient or pass-through agency for funds, but cannot answer this type of question without rolling it through all the layers of its structure. And even when they provide the answer to the question, it tells us nothing about the value that has been added by supporting this type of structure, rather than a simpler one. But formations with multi-layered architectures are in fact aiming not only to scale up, but to *deepen* the impact of the work of their individual members by fostering their knowledge, capacity and strategies, and through value-adding approaches that a single organization may not have the ability, resources, or reach, to undertake. These entities therefore require M&E approaches that combine the assessment of (i) their effectiveness as networks (such as the Wilson-Grau/Nunez), (ii) their advocacy impact (through tools and recommendations such as offered by Patton and Klugman), and (iii) a judicious combination of the more conventional frameworks for assessing local- or member-level results.

← **Design M&E to suit organizational architecture**

9 Many women's organizations find that the M&E frameworks and approaches required by some donors demand resources that are beyond their capacity, such as the abilities of their staff, the time-intensiveness of their implementation, or the need to bring in external expertise that they cannot always access or afford due to resource constraints, location, or other factors. Often, the complexity and amount of data required is excessive, and does not necessarily provide a more comprehensive picture of implementation or impact – for effective M&E, sometimes less is more, if the approach includes fewer but more sensitive and intelligent indicators. In addition, in organizations with multi-layered structures, capacity to manage sophisticated M&E tools and data requirements will vary across the network. All this implies a need for grant-seekers to assess their organizational M&E capacity in transparent and non-threatening ways, without feeling exposed or fearing loss of funding. Donors could promote this by transparently sharing their M&E requirements on their websites, just as they do their application procedures, to minimize potential confusion regarding expectations on this issue. Overall, balancing M&E needs with capacities requires both donor and grantee to interrogate different M&E frameworks and tools through the capacity lens during the grant negotiation process itself, identify fewer but more sensitive indicators of progress and change, and create approaches that are feasible for the grantee organization to use, given their particular capacity profile.

← **Factor in organizational capacity when designing M&E**

10 If M&E is intended to increase operational effectiveness and contribute to learning, it cannot be treated as an add-on or afterthought. Yet sometimes complex M&E requirements are attached to projects *after* they are approved, assuming this is something that every organization should be able to deliver. This fails to take into account

← **Invest resources in developing M&E capacity**

the fact that many frameworks and methods require a certain level of skill or training – not to mention staff time - for their effective use. As mentioned, above, this is not always the case – but more problematically, grantees find that their M&E needs are not seen as part of the project cost, or built into their budgets. Several organizations we interviewed for our research said that the information required of them was so extensive that almost an entire staff person was required for the task, but this cost was not built into their grants. The time has come to integrate M&E into project design much more consciously, and to allocate serious resources for this purpose – this investment, after all, yields rich dividends in terms of both results and learning that can be leveraged for future work by both grantee and donor.

11 AWID's research – including in-depth interviews with women's organizations engaged in complex and challenging women's rights work – indicates that donors are sometimes seeking results that are unrealistic within short project time frames. For example, a violence against women intervention cannot show reduction in violence within a three-year project cycle, but can at best report increased awareness or recognition of such violence as a crime, or having broken some of the silence around this in the form of increased reporting of such violence by some victims or their families. It is vital for both donors and women's groups to recognize that macro-level changes - such as lower violence rates – occur over longer periods of time, when a number of stakeholders buy in to the change, and a variety of cultural, political and economic forces coalesce. No single project can work on all these fronts, much less in a three- or five-year time frame. What we can measure, however, are interim changes within specific stakeholder groups. It is therefore important for donor and grantee representatives to discuss, at the outset of a project, what can be most *realistically* measured and reported within the time frame of the project. This preempts grantees from making exaggerated claims, and donors from feeling disappointed with the results. As the old management saying goes: ***It is better to under-promise and over-deliver than the other way around!***

12 It is in this context that generating periodic baselines becomes a powerful tool in accurately assessing project achievements – and directions for the next phase of work. When a clear situational analysis is generated at the outset of a project, organizations can more accurately place the changes that have occurred in the course of their work – both positive and negative – against this baseline, identify what worked and what did not, and refine their strategies accordingly. They can make a much stronger case, as well, for continued investment in their work. Donors can in turn leverage this kind of evidence to make *their* case to their governments or other contributors, for why such work needs support. Together, donors and grantees can advocate more convincingly to the world at large. For all these reasons, baselines are hugely important and worthy of investing time, money, and people resources.

← **Tailor indicators and results to time frames**

← **Invest in the creation of baselines**

Why do we – both donors and women's rights organizations - need a paradigm shift in our approach to M&E? Because social power structures and the injustices they create are both resilient and powerful, and it is very difficult indeed to achieve lasting changes in gender relations; because any kind of social change is unpredictable and the pathways to it are constantly shifting; and above all, because every social change intervention – especially on behalf of women – is an uneven contest between meagerly-resourced change activists and powerfully entrenched interests. If we accept these realities, we know that the assumptions behind most M&E approaches are not based on solid fact but intelligent guesswork. The best we can do, then, is to develop M&E systems collaboratively, with the best knowledge and experience we can bring to bear, with clarity about expectations, and with flexible, realistic goals. The evidence is that when we go about it as a joint learning experiment, M&E systems can actually generate some very convincing results and lasting learning for all.

↙ **Why does this matter?**

Building Feminist Movements and Organizations

Feminist movements and organizations around the world face numerous challenges today: revising and strengthening their strategic capacity; empowering women and advancing their rights in increasingly complex economic and political contexts; holding the line where past gains are being eroded; and assessing their impact and "making their case" more effectively in the face of declining resources. Through our Building Feminist Movements and Organizations strategic initiative, AWID seeks to promote more critical reflection, build new knowledge from practice, and provide new analytical tools and resources to inform and enhance action by women's movements and organizations worldwide. The goal of this program is to assist advocates and activists in organizational strengthening and movement building, enhance capacity to capture the changes they are making, and help them to build women's collective power to access their rights and advance gender equality from the local to global level.

These publications can be found on the AWID website: www.awid.org

Capturing Change in Women's Realities: A Critical Overview of Current Monitoring & Evaluation Frameworks and Approaches by Srilatha Batliwala, Associate Scholar and Alexandra Pittman, Research Associate

Changing Their World: Concepts and Practices of Women's Movements by Srilatha Batliwala

And

Building Feminist Movements and Organizations: Global Perspectives, Edited by Lydia Alpizar Duran, Nol D. Payne and Anahi Russo

The Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) is an international, multi-generational, feminist, creative, future-orientated membership organization committed to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and women's human rights. AWID™s mission is to strengthen the voice, impact and influence of women™s rights advocates, organizations and movements internationally to effectively advance the rights of women.