



A Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework for Humanitarian Innovation Programmes

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The Research People: The Research People is a London-based research consultancy that supports humanitarian innovation and effective locally-led crisis response. Humanitarian research is best when delivered through diverse teams and TRPs multidisciplinary team of researchers come from the UK, Uganda, South Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon and India. The focus of its work is helping humanitarian organisations create and use evidence to solve problems and make better decisions.

GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation

The GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme works to accelerate the delivery and impact of digital humanitarian assistance. This will be achieved by building a learning and research agenda to inform the future of digital humanitarian response, catalysing partnerships and innovation for new digital humanitarian services, advocating for enabling policy environments, monitoring and evaluating performance, disseminating insights and profiling achievements. The programme is supported by the UK Department for International Development.

Learn more at www.gsma.com/m4h or contact us at m4h@gsma.com

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Practical Clarity: Practical Clarity is a consultancy that supports organizations and their leaders in the development of complex collaborative systems. This form of innovation tackles complex problems, transforming existing systems in response to industry disruptions, new technology opportunities, and long standing intractable problems.

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01 Introduction

The last decade has seen an increase in humanitarian initiatives designed to respond to gaps in funding created by the growing scale of crises. These include programmes to transform the current humanitarian system, as well as innovative initiatives that explore new forms of funding and opportunities presented by emerging technologies.

The GSMA's Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation (M4H) programme is one such example. It aims to accelerate a digital humanitarian future in which more services are available to crisis-affected populations and humanitarian organisations can respond more efficiently. The M4H programme is based on a learning and research agenda that aims to inform

this future response, catalyse partnerships and innovations for new digital humanitarian services and advocate for an enabling policy environment. The programme is structured into three work streams focused on research and insights, market engagement and advocacy, and is supported by a programme services team.



From the outset, an important priority of the programme has been to generate evidence that would not only improve the programme, but also be useful for other organisations working to innovate in the humanitarian sector. While there has been an increase in research and funding for innovation in the sector, there are few rigorous frameworks for guiding the development and assessing the impact of programmes that leverage innovative change.

This report outlines the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) framework developed for the GSMA's M4H programme. It builds on recent work to generate evidence for and measure the impact of innovation projects (including by IDIA, the HIF, Response Innovation Labs and ALNAP), on methods for evaluating projects in complex systems (including a useful compendium from USAID) and more widespread frameworks for evaluating humanitarian advocacy and research initiatives.

The MEL framework is used to not only evaluate the innovations that M4H supports, but also the impact and contribution of the programme itself, including its research and advocacy initiatives. This report outlines the key elements of the MEL framework and explains how it has been applied to the M4H programme to build an evidence base for the programme's activities and to facilitate learning. This framework is unique in its approach and it is hoped that other organisations may benefit from using the thinking to adapt their own approach to generating evidence regarding humanitarian innovation.

There is a specific focus in this report on how to generate evidence for and evaluate the innovation projects within the programme's market engagement focus. These projects fall into two distinct work streams:



Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation Fund:

The Innovation Fund awards grants of up to £500,000 to innovators working in the humanitarian sector whose ideas leverage mobile technology. Each round has a slightly different focus¹ depending on current needs. Two rounds of grantees were announced as of late 2019 and a third will follow in 2020.



Strategic Partnerships:

The M4H programme aims to facilitate and catalyse mobile-enabled innovations in the sector through its expertise and convening power. The team works with mobile network operators (MNOs), humanitarian organisations and other technology providers, such as fintechs, to identify challenges that mobile solutions could address, and then design and pilot innovative solutions. The Strategic Partnerships team does not directly provide funding, but leverages its technical and sectoral expertise as facilitators. Organisations engaged through this work stream are referred to as "partners".

1. GSMA (2019) Key Trends for Round 3 of the GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation Fund



1.1 How the framework was developed

The MEL framework was developed through interviews and workshops with a group of M4H programme staff, partners and Innovation Fund grantees. We also identified and mapped 22 different models to assess the potential to scale up social innovations. The models come from a range of innovation funds, think tanks and consultancies. We reviewed the components of each model to identify core themes and mapped them against “pathways to scale” developed in a paper on scaling innovations by the Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation (GAHI).

Subsequent interviews with grantees were semi-structured and explored the grantees’ journey to date, including the value they are creating, the barriers they have encountered, their current or planned approach to scaling into new locations or to different groups of users and their planned model for financial sustainability. Workshops with the M4H programme were designed to explore the elements of the M4H programme and how they fit together.

1.2 Current approaches to measuring innovation

Our review of existing models and tools identified five key limitations to measuring humanitarian innovation programmes. The

framework outlined in this report aims to address these limitations while building on the strengths of existing models.

Types of innovation: too much focus on products and services opposed to problems



Humanitarian innovation funders have generally focused on identifying innovative new products or services that fall within broadly defined problem areas. This approach works well in environments where solutions occur in relative isolation and can scale relatively quickly. However, these approaches tend to favour incremental over disruptive impact, and the individual solutions can focus too heavily on the technology (i.e. the solution) rather than the problem. **More sophisticated approaches are needed to ensure that humanitarian problems are described and understood, that more diverse solutions are funded and that collaboration and learning between innovators are promoted.**



Innovation stakeholders: limited input from affected populations



Related to this, affected populations are not sufficiently involved in defining their problems and selecting solutions. Feedback from affected populations does not feature in much of the innovation evidence literature. In a recent study, only 33 per cent of humanitarian innovators included in the study had consulted with affected populations. These populations are also rarely included in grantee processes for agreeing on problem areas or in fund management processes for selecting projects to invest in. **It is time that frameworks begin assessing how successfully innovations are soliciting the views and perspectives of the communities they are designed to serve.** This will likely lead to the design and delivery of more impactful products and services.

Metrics for measuring innovation: heavy reliance on simple metrics



At the fund level, most models for assessing the success of innovation portfolios rely too heavily on the number of new solutions and the rate at which they progress through often arbitrary “gates” in the innovation cycle (e.g. from prototype to pilot). At the innovation level, there is an overwhelming reliance on measuring impact based on the number of lives saved or improved. While these are useful as a starting point, **they do not consider the quality of problem and innovation selection, evaluate efforts to build a supporting ecosystem or measure whether common barriers to scaling innovation are being identified and overcome.**

Methodologies for measuring innovation: preference for experimental methodologies



Donors and innovation funders have favoured experimental methodologies, such as randomised control trials (RCTs) as a “gold standard” for demonstrating the impact of individual innovation projects. However, these types of methodologies are difficult to apply in humanitarian contexts, raise ethical concerns about withholding assistance from control groups, overlook ideas that have slow or unpredictable impacts and result in an enthusiasm for funding ideas that are easy to measure at the individual level (such as those in healthcare or education) at the expense of innovations that are harder to measure. **Methodologies are needed that take a broader view of impact, and that look at evidence beyond just impact.**



Scaling innovation: assumptions around successful scaling



While scaling appears to be a stated goal for most, if not all funders, frameworks for humanitarian innovation give limited guidance on what it means to make an innovation scalable or sustainable. A popular definition for scaling is increasing the impact of the innovation relative to the size of the problem or need it seeks to address. However, this change may happen in different ways and at different levels, and innovators will have different definitions of success depending on their context and priorities. **In future, frameworks should ensure they allow for flexible definitions of scalability and sustainability that account for local priorities and situations, acknowledge the time that scaling requires and recognise that not all innovations should scale.** Tools and resources to help innovators establish sustainability plans are also required.

This report therefore aims to provide a more complete and rigorous view of elements that contribute to the success and impact of a programme designed to support systems change in the humanitarian sector. It is based on the premise that programmes that aim to advance humanitarian systems must be delivered by diverse teams working on an array

of interconnected problems. Strong information flows between the teams are needed to ensure that a programme such as M4H lives up to its potential. **The MEL framework therefore needs to facilitate reflection and sharing about challenges and outcomes across the M4H programme.**



02 MEL Framework

The GSMA M4H programme has three work streams that together are designed to increase access to and use of life-enhancing digital humanitarian services. The MEL framework captures outcomes and learning across the work streams. **A simple four-part model of the framework is illustrated in Figure 1. Each part includes a category of questions that the programme must ask and learn from in**

order to improve. These four categories of questions are not independent of each other. For example, what the programme learns about the problems and success factors that can be addressed through digital humanitarian services will help inform the innovations and services they select as potential solutions to learn more about and the evidence created will be of value to the sector at large.

Figure 1

The MEL framework is comprised of four categories of questions that the M4H programme should address to learn and improve.

Problems and opportunities	What are the problems that can be addressed through life-enhancing mobile services?	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High numbers of unbanked urban refugees in Jordan • Low digital literacy reducing access to services for the most vulnerable 	Success metric: Is the programme generating research and evidence on problems and opportunities relevant to MNOs, humanitarian organisations and affected populations?
Potential solutions	What are the viable life-enhancing mobile services that can scale in humanitarian environments?	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing trust in mobile money through demonstration of meaningful use cases and recruitment of community-based mobile money • Access to work via micro-tasking applications agents community based 	Success metric: Is the programme identifying high-quality interrelated solutions?
Drivers and challenges	What drivers and challenges determine whether life-enhancing mobile services achieve scale?	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust and acceptance of mobile financial solutions by unbanked populations in Jordan • Contract terms between humanitarian organisations and mobile money providers 	Success metric: Are barriers to innovation accounted for and overcome?
Ecosystem investments and interventions	What interventions overcome those challenges?	Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy for non-Syrian refugees in Jordan to register for SIM cards. • Policy change on access to SIM cards for refugees in Uganda 	Success metric: How effectively are systemic barriers to life-enhancing mobile solutions being addressed?



2.1 Problems and opportunities: Which pain points matter?

The first category captures everything the M4H programme learns about the problems digital humanitarian solutions might address. For example, the barriers to delivering aid that might be solved with digital solutions or the priorities of crisis-affected individuals and communities. This collection provides a foundation for the rest of the programme; for example, the research and lessons that are gathered can help provide clear criteria for selecting project proposals and designing programme activities.

The success measure for this first category is how effectively specific problems are identified. Recent work by humanitarian organisations has shown the importance of clearly defined problems that are understood and “framed” from the perspective of affected populations. Having a clearly defined problem can help to avoid investing in trendy new technologies that do not actually address the underlying challenges.

Well-defined problems can also support investment in complementary solutions. Humanitarian Grand Challenges, for example, have used barrier analysis to systematically model barriers to aid delivery, leading to investments in solutions that address different parts of a problem.

Finally, an important part of this category is identifying “guardrails” for digital humanitarian services. This includes safeguards for privacy, permission and other factors that prevent doing harm through digital systems. The programme is investing in research on data privacy and developing internal frameworks

and guidance around how to understand and minimise digital harm, and how to build ethical thinking into innovation. This will complement parallel work by Elrha, UNHCR and the Start Network, and support innovators to ensure they are aware of, and account for, the broader ethical implications of their work.

The aim of this part of the MEL framework is therefore to assess whether problems are being identified and defined. For the M4H programme, it primarily assesses the work of the Insights team, which is responsible for undertaking consultations, research and evidence gathering for MNOs and humanitarian organisations on the opportunities of digital innovation. The team has defined two areas of impact: more efficient humanitarian delivery via mobile solutions and improved and equitable access to mobile solutions for affected communities, where appropriate.

An understanding of system-level problems inevitably changes over time. This collection of problems and opportunities is expected to evolve and shift as new ideas emerge and the ecosystem changes. The M4H programme is using **qualitative tools to regularly reflect** on the types of problems digital innovation can solve and define what research is needed to understand these opportunities. Ultimately, a clear picture of problems helps to identify which solutions should be funded. Evaluators are also empowered to compare solutions that address different issues by referring back to the underlying problems being addressed.



2.2 Potential solutions: What is the right combination of activities?

As discussed in the introduction, traditional grant selection has focused on the potential value of distinct innovations, with the goal of selecting the “best” individual solutions. However, the M4H programme aims to support and fund a holistic set of solutions that address identified problems. This may include grantee projects through the Innovation Fund or projects and pilots the M4H team is supporting through strategic partnerships. It may also include convening stakeholders around priority issues,

facilitating dialogue, brokering partnerships, conducting peer reviews or contributing to partner research, collaborating with influential bodies to advocate on regulatory and policy-related matters and holding or supporting advocacy events and disseminating insights.

By viewing the solutions as a collection of different types of activities, initiatives and grants, the M4H programme can aim to:

Prioritise difficult problems

Sometimes it may be appropriate to give priority to relatively weaker proposals that address a critical problem area.



Avoid overlaps

Funders can choose not to over invest in multiple solutions that ultimately address the same problem, thereby ensuring that innovations are wide reaching.



Seek connections

Considering how different ideas are related will help encourage investments and activities that support and build on each other.



The aim of this part of the MEL framework is to assess the quality of solutions. This includes assessing whether the solution addresses an important problem, the impact of the solution and the quality of implementation. The GSMA supports grantees and its partners to gather these types of evidence. At the outset, grantees, with the support of their partners, develop a **Theory of Change** to articulate their problem statement, the areas in which their innovations should deliver and their assumptions about how the innovation will scale. To capture evidence of broader initiatives, a **partnership outcomes tool** maps what the programme’s strategic partnerships are teaching it about

the contribution of mobile solutions to better humanitarian response and recovery.

The M4H programme has taken a grantee/partner-led approach to identifying evidence priorities and needs. The team supports grantees and partners in the design and delivery of **bespoke MEL projects** that address specific evidence needs and gather feedback from end users to support on-going adaptation of projects. The approaches taken across the portfolio will be used to explore what types of evidence grantees and partners consider in different types of environments, and why.



2.3 Drivers and challenges: Inventory of needs and barriers to scaling

The third category contains an inventory of lessons about the successes and challenges grantees and partners have faced in implementing and scaling digital humanitarian solutions. This includes, for example, challenges related to regulation, supply chains and

acceptance of digital solutions, as well as factors related to relationships and design processes. Addressing these issues is typically one of the primary purposes of pilot funding or a partnership, and therefore central to the success of a programme's investment in innovation.

The success factors and challenges an innovator faces are typically quite diverse, so it is helpful to group them according to the type of response the innovator must provide. The framework draws on a model by GAHI:



1. Value

The opportunities to create additional value by investing in new features, additional value propositions, better quality, lower cost or improved efficiency.



2. Difficulty

Barriers and shortfalls that must be addressed for the innovation to work in the real world, which may include barriers relating to regulation, access or supply chains.



3. Sustainability

A viable business and revenue model that can sustain the adoption, operation and evolution of the innovation over time. It is important to note that in humanitarian contexts this may include a sustainable grant-based model.



4. Variability

The challenges of adapting an innovation in diverse contexts with varied users.

By tracking what drives and poses challenges to innovations being implemented, it is possible to assess how successfully the programme is resolving issues and moving an innovator to scale. There are also opportunities to monitor which problems have been resolved and therefore whether the most difficult issues are being addressed.

The M4H programme is gathering a range of qualitative and quantitative data related to this collection from its team, grantees and partners. A key tool for grantees has been the **“readiness to scale” tool** that was tested in a face-to-face workshop with grantees in Kigali, Rwanda in July 2019. The tool provides an assessment of progress against four types of challenges and identifies issues that must be resolved for an innovation to scale in both its current context and others. A before-after assessment

highlights common barriers faced across the programme, and will allow the Innovation Fund to track the progression of its portfolio of innovations to scale, identify the challenges that were overcome during each grant period and how those challenges were addressed.

At the programme level, **regular programme-wide reflections** are facilitated to allow the team to share what they have learned about enabling factors and challenges to scaling, and to articulate how the programme contributes to a better understanding of barriers. **Feedback collection tools** are also used to collate input from MNOs and humanitarian organisations about their priorities in the digital humanitarian innovation space as well as information needs, and these feed into the learning agenda and advocacy priorities on a regular basis.

2.4 Ecosystem investments and interventions: Where institutional power matters power matters

Many of the problems encountered by individual projects and innovations can be addressed in partnership with others in the local operational ecosystem. However, some issues represent bigger systemic challenges that cannot be tackled effectively by an innovator and their immediate partners. These systemic barriers create an opportunity for a large established programme to leverage its reach, reputation and resources to achieve transformational change. Examples of these challenges might include addressing regulatory barriers, brokering changes in sector business practices or enabling access to new technologies.

The final category includes common barriers that require institutional support to be

addressed effectively. At the GSMA, research from the Insights team has identified barriers related to regulation (including digital identity), revenue models and go-to-market models for MNOs and digital service providers.

The aim of this final part of the MEL framework is to assess how effectively this category of barriers is being addressed. This is assessed through regular workshops and reflections conducted using, for example, outcome harvesting methodologies to understand how advocacy activities are contributing to policy change.



03 Using the framework

The four category model is currently being used to build an evidence base for the M4H programme. Section 2 highlighted some of the tools developed to gather data and monitor how effectively the programme is learning from and addressing the questions and challenges that arise in each area.

These tools are illustrated in Figure 2. They draw on a range of established research methodologies

used in complex programmes, including participatory theories of change and outcome harvesting. The tools are designed to be as simple as possible while also collecting vital data in the GSMA’s identified outcome areas, including access and use of mobile solutions during humanitarian preparedness, response and recovery for affected communities, as well as humanitarian efficiency.

The top half of the graphic outlines the different tools available to collect, record and review data. There are two to four tools for each of the four collections and these tools fall into three categories:

Numerical trackers:

These tools facilitate monitoring of numerical data on outcomes and processes. They collate the data that will help the GSMA share its impact with donors while also providing simple tools for teams with already high workloads



Qualitative data collection tools:

These tools are designed to gather feedback data from stakeholders. They aim to generate clearer evidence of the assumptions in the Theory of Change as well as programme outcomes.



Qualitative reflection tools:

These are qualitative tools that facilitate internal learning and information sharing. They document lessons that are already being gathered and shared informally with the aim of capturing the data in a more strategic way.



The second part of the diagram illustrates how the data feeds into three different types of learning, necessary for any innovation programme:

Iterate:

Gathering regular feedback from grantees, strategic partners and other stakeholders helps to collate lessons that will inform on-going project and programme strategy and decisions. The Innovation Fund also uses a build, test, measure, iterate approach to help grantees gather data quickly to guide decision making.



Evaluate:

Data that generates evidence about what works, identifies programme outcomes and feeds into the logframe, annual reports and endline research.



Storytelling:

Information that identifies critical points in the story of a programme or project to build a shared narrative about the grantee, partner and programme priorities and journey.



While all these data collection tools have been important for generating evidence on each element of the M4H programme, the key lesson from this process is the value

of an overarching framework that allows a rapidly expanding team to gather data in a way that promotes shared learning and increases the overall value of the programme.



Figure 2

DECISION MAKING

The M4H programme has operationalised the framework using three types of tools: numerical trackers, qualitative data collection tools, and reflection tools. The data feeds into a variety of different outputs and is designed to inform day-to-day decisions, generate evidence for stakeholders, and support storytelling by the programme and its partners and grantees.

DATA COLLECTION

Research feedback log
Theory of Change development
Partnership tool
Feedback from training

Collective insights and challenges
Trackers
Advocacy outcome harvesting
Pre-post partner readiness to scale tool
Innovation storytelling

Ecosystem review
Innovation storytelling

Iterate
To inform day-to-day decisions

Evaluate
To generate evidence for donors and users

Storytelling
To explain innovation journeys to different audiences

OUTPUTS



INSIGHTS

Review research priorities and learning agenda

MARKET ENGAGEMENT

Review support needed for innovators and partnerships

ADVOCACY

Review advocacy priorities



ANNUAL REVIEW

Providing evidence on activities and outcomes to donor – particular focus on outcome areas

LOGFRAME

Tracking core indicators



ENDLINE

Informing assessment of GSMA's contribution to the learning agenda.



INTERNAL NARRATIVE

Critical points for the GSMA M4H programme so far



The MEL framework discussed in this report was developed for the GSMA M4H programme by The Research People and Practical Clarity, in consultation with the wider programme. As the framework is a living document that will be adapted as we continue learning, we are not publishing it in full in the immediate future. However, the GSMA is committed to sharing learning and evidence that will benefit the wider humanitarian innovation ecosystem, so if you wish to learn more about the framework and the tools that are being used, please contact Matthew Downer at the GSMA (m4h@gsma.com) or Lydia Tanner at The Research People (lydia@theresearchpeople.org).

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