



Interviewer

Matthew Downer, Insights Manager, Monitoring & Evaluation at GSMA

Guest

Lydia Tanner, Director, [The Research People](#)

Intro *You're listening to the GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme's podcast.*

Matthew Hi and welcome to the podcast from the GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme. My name is Matthew Downer and I'm an Insights Manager here on the programme.

Today we're going to be focusing on evidence and evaluation for humanitarian innovation projects, specifically digital, like we focus on at the programme. This podcast coincides with a report that we put out today that looks at this topic.

I'm joined today by Lydia Tanner from The Research People who work as our Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (so, MEL) partner for the whole programme.

So, Lydia, could you give us a bit of a background to yourself and The Research People, and a little bit of the work you've been doing with us here at the programme?

Lydia Yeah, absolutely. So my name's Lydia Tanner. I lead a team called The Research People and we do lots of research and evaluation relating to how technology, together with local leadership, can increase the information and the choice and decision-making power available to affected populations.

Matthew Great, and you've been working with us now for about a year, as our Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (so, MEL) partners. Can you give us a little bit of a background as to what that entails?

- Lydia** So we started off about a year ago by doing some research, looking at the existing frameworks for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning around technology and innovation in the humanitarian sector and we've been working to put together a framework and a set of tools and to actually get those up and running to help innovators and also programme staff to generate evidence about what's working, what's not working and how we can make humanitarian innovation better.
- Matthew** Great. So, as part of this process, we took a bit of a step back to look at evidence in this space. So what do you see as the role of evidence, evaluation and learning in humanitarian innovation, and thinking specifically around the digital innovations we focus on here at GSMA?
- Lydia** I think there's a few things that are important. When people talk about evidence they often talk specifically about impact but we've tried to, as you say, take a step back and we've had a look at all of the different frameworks that exist for evidencing both innovation funds and portfolios but also innovation projects, and there's a few things that we think are really important:
- The first** one is to try and make sure that we're describing and identifying problems well. So it's very easy to come up with an idea without really thinking about what problem it is that you're solving, and so the first role that we see for evidence is to think about how we can make sure that we're identifying the right problems, identifying problems that matter to the crisis affected populations, identifying problems that matter to humanitarians, and making sure that we're matching up those solutions with real problems.
- The second** thing is that we're really keen to see that there's more learning, both between different grantees and partners within the GSMA programme, but also more broadly. It's very easy for innovators to become quite siloed and focused on what they're doing and we're really keen to see how evidence can be one of the ways that we increase learning across different innovators.
- And obviously you referred specifically to thinking about digital innovation and it's still quite early days in terms of implementing digital innovations within the humanitarian sector, so we want to make sure that we're learning about some of the benefits but also the unintended consequences of technology within humanitarian settings.

Matthew Great. Thank you. And you mention the focus on impact and how everyone's looking to tell a success story, and as you said digital innovation is quite nascent, so how do you think innovators can be using evidence to look at the success of their innovations seeing as it's quite early doors?

Lydia Yeah. So I think the first thing to remember is that there are lots of different ways that innovations can grow and different ways that they might get funded, different revenue streams, so not all innovations will focus primarily on donor funded models, although many will.

So the first thing is to make sure that we're being really innovator led so that we're not telling innovators what evidence they need to generate, but we're also asking and supporting innovators to generate the evidence that they feel that they need, or that their different audiences are asking for.

We also want to make sure that we're supporting innovators to think about what methods are going to be appropriate to them because lots of innovators are going to be coming up with ideas about how to do things differently in the sector, but generating good data around what's working and what's not working is really difficult and requires some thought.

So one of the kind of key roles for people who work on evidence is to support innovators to think about what might be some of the pitfalls of trying to gather data in particular settings, and how to approach data collection in an ethical way and to make sure that we're actually using all of the data that we're collecting.

It's one of the real tragedies of monitoring and evaluation across the sector, is that so much information and data gets gathered but not all of it gets used, and even the stuff that does get into reports doesn't necessarily then feed into decision-making. So we really want to try and close that loop and make sure that the evidence that we're generating is answering the questions that people have.

Matthew Great, thank you, I think at the beginning of your answer you talked a bit about how innovators grow. How can the innovators be thinking around their evidence requirements for assessing their pathways to scale, knowing that scale can mean a number of different things for different people?

Lydia Yeah, so that's a really good question.

I think **the first thing** that we always encourage people to do is to think about who are the different audiences. So it's easy to, when you start thinking about needing evidence, to kind of jump to conclusions about what evidence that it is that you need, particularly when there's lots of literature around about the different methodologies that you should be using and the different techniques and approaches. So it's easy to jump straight in and think about what methods you want to be using. We really encourage people to take a step back and think about who the audiences are, how they want to use the data, and to make sure that we're not collecting data that answers questions that people aren't asking.

The second thing kind of relating to that is really we're trying to encourage people to keep a focus on the perspectives of affected populations. So an organisation called [ELRHA](#) did a study last year where they found that only 33 per cent of the humanitarian innovators that they included in their study had actually collected any information about the perspectives of affected populations.

Obviously we're looking, as humanitarian innovators, to make the sector better and we need to make sure that as we do that we're really consulting affected populations about what matters to them, what problems are important to them, and how the solutions can be improved to really meet the needs that they have.

We also want to encourage people to think beyond just impact. So while impact and having an understanding of the effect of your innovation is really important, there are other things that we want to encourage innovators to think about and to generate evidence for as well. So that might include evidence that you're solving an important problem, it might include evidence that the idea that you've come up with is better than some of the other existing solutions. But it might also include evidence that you have the partnerships that you need in order to implement the solution. So really thinking a bit more broadly, not just about impact, but also about the other questions that you need to answer.

Matthew As you said earlier, throughout this process of working together, we've looked at a number of different frameworks and approaches to evidence and evaluation with innovation in the humanitarian sector and looked at how it might be taken forward.

So could you give a bit of an outline of how The Research People and GSMA have thought about moving this topic forward?

Lydia Yeah, absolutely. So I think the first thing to say is that this is still quite a nascent field and so while there are a few different frameworks and approaches that have been put forward specifically for humanitarian innovation, there isn't much consensus yet across the board for how this should be done.

And so different donors have taken different approaches. Different funders and different implementing organisations have also taken different approaches. So we've looked at those but we've also looked at some of the more traditional frameworks that exist for providing monitoring and evaluation for humanitarian programmes in general, and then we've also taken a bit of a look at some of the approaches that exist outside of the humanitarian sector too.

There's a few challenges, I guess, that we came up against when we looked at those frameworks and how appropriate they were for providing evidence around humanitarian innovation. We've put together a brief report that outlines some of those, alongside a framework that we're proposing within the GSMA programme, which we'd really encourage you to take a look at.

Some of the challenges that we came up against were that there's quite a heavy reliance on very simple metrics for whether an innovation is progressing, how many people it's reaching, and these metrics don't generally consider the quality of the innovation solution, they don't necessarily consider the quality of the problem definition, and also whether these different innovation solutions are supporting and feeding into one another or whether we're ending up solving problems that either overlap or are in completely different sectors, and therefore we're not facilitating learning across different innovations.

The second thing to say is, because of an absence of consensus around how to measure impact of humanitarian innovations and how to provide evidence around humanitarian innovation in general, there has sometimes been a bit of an over-reliance on the idea of randomised control trials and other, what are called ‘experimental methodologies’, as approaches for demonstrating impact.

And while these do have value for some innovations in particular context, they can be very difficult to implement within humanitarian settings. There can be ethical challenges around implementing them with some humanitarian solutions. And so we really felt that it was important to look more broadly at what impact means when we’re looking at humanitarian innovation.

One other thing that we touch on is that there are a lot of assumptions around what it means to scale an innovation, but not very much guidance around really how to do that and what the different pathways to scaling are coming through from donors and funders. And so a lot of frameworks don’t really allow for the flexibility of different scaling pathways that might exist. So we wanted to make sure that we thought quite broadly about what scaling innovation means and provided the flexibility within our framework for doing that.

Matthew

Great. Thank you very much. I guess now’s a good time, since you’ve mentioned it, to talk more about the work we’ve been doing together in the programme, both the report - which as you mentioned came out the same day as this podcast, and we definitely suggest you go read it if you’re interested in anything we’ve said - but also the framework in general.

So looking at the way that the Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation programme here at the GSMA is able to evidence the work we do, both about innovators but also how we as a programme are facilitating learning for both sectors we work with, so the humanitarians and the mobile sector and the technology sector at large.

So can you talk us through the general principles of this framework and how we structured it to achieve those goals?

Lydia

We looked at the programme as a whole and we worked out that there were four different types of evidence that we needed to collect, and we organised those into four categories.

So:

- the first category is problems and opportunities,
- the second is potential solutions,
- the third is drivers and challenges for projects, and
- the fourth is ecosystem interventions.

I'll just run through each of those briefly.

So the first category is problems and opportunities and here we're trying to generate evidence about the problems that digital innovation can address.

The second category is about potential solutions, and here we're trying to generate evidence around what are the solutions that address these problems, and we want to provide a holistic view of these solutions. So it's not just about picking individual solutions that work but it's also about identifying solutions that are complementary, where solutions complement and facilitate learning between each other, and avoiding too many overlaps.

The third category is looking at the drivers and challenges for projects, and this is about generating evidence about what factors help a project succeed, what factors present challenges for projects being implemented and, therefore, where there might be ways that funders can intervene and support projects.

And that takes us on to the final category which is about the systematic barriers to innovation. And here we want to generate evidence about the interventions that can be delivered in order to help overcome some of those systematic barriers, which might be regulatory, it might be to do with funding, but they're the things that we see coming up again and again across lots of different projects, in lots of different contexts.

Matthew

So obviously across the four categories we're talking about a lot of different types of evidence, as such, there's a lot of different tools that we've put together for this framework.

Do you think there's maybe one or two that are quite interesting in the way that we've approached the innovations?

Lydia

So we've gone through the four different categories that we've developed as part of the framework and, as you say, within each of those categories we have some tools that generate numerical data about the programme and about the grantees and partners, but we also have a variety of different qualitative data collection tools, some of which are gathering information about outcomes, for example, but some of which are also just helping people to reflect and facilitating learning across the programme, which was really a priority for us.

I'm going to give two brief examples:

The first one is called the readiness to scale tool, and this is something that we've designed for grantees and also partners to use. And the purpose of this is really for innovators to take a step back and try and look at their innovation in a more holistic way than they often have the chance to do in the business of actually trying to get something off the ground.

It takes the innovator through four different areas of their innovation. It looks, for example, at some of the barriers that they're facing. It also looks at how they're thinking about adjusting the innovation to be suitable for different contexts, as well as the revenue and sustainability models that they're considering.

The aim of this really is to help innovators to look at what are their most significant challenges, how can GSMA support them to address those, but also by comparing their responses to these questions before and after the grant period we can help see how their innovation has developed over the course of the grant lifecycle.

A second example at the programme level is what we call the ecosystem map. So this is a chance for the whole team to get together and to think more deeply about one or two of the countries in which it's implementing a significant number of programmes and supporting a significant number of innovators.

And the purpose here is to really look at how the innovation ecosystem is changing within that country, what are the ways that GSMA is currently engaged, who are the key organisations that it's partnering with, and to kind of plan for the future and think about how it wants to take a step forward.

Matthew

So all the tools that we've put together that are quite formalised all focus on the team here in the GSMA offices or the innovators' headquarters, and they're less focused on the perspectives of users.

But as you said earlier on, a key focus of ours has been a) around allowing innovators to choose their own evidence, as required, and also to really solicit the views of the people who are being affected by these innovations, the service users, the beneficiaries, where we've proven positive impact.

And so I guess interesting to point out that alongside all these tools we've made available a budget for all of our innovators to define their own evaluation or evidence projects where we always encourage them to go into the communities they're serving and find out how they're doing, and this can be both at the beginning of a project to understand how it might be tailored, or as we're going through - or even towards the end - to really understand the experiences. So the framework we've put together has really looked for a top-and-tail approach towards evidence and driving the change that we pointed out earlier about where some of the frameworks were perhaps a little bit behind the curve.

So I guess one final question for you, and then afterwards maybe I'll give the same, what has been most surprising or positive for you so far on this journey seeing as we're now maybe 18 months down the line of this evidence in innovation journey together?

Lydia

So I think the thing that I've enjoyed the most is facilitating different parts of the team to come together.

What's really exciting about this programme is that there's lots of insights being generated through the research, through all of the different grantee projects that are being funded through some of the strategic partnerships that are being brought together.

And what's quite exciting for me is seeing the potential power of a learning framework to enable people to share ideas and to have new ideas about how to make a programme stronger and how to facilitate more connections between different people who are trying to innovate in this area.

Matthew Yeah, I would definitely agree with you there. I think, like any medium to large team, we would naturally fall into a little bit of a silo approach here and there. So I think this whole exercise has been great in making the team share the evidence because we all do so many different things that between us the knowledge and the evidence can be quite big, but making the time and space to facilitate that has been really impactful.

Lydia And one other thing that I think I would also add is a lot of innovators when they think about evidence it can be something that feels quite intimidating. Particularly because, as I mentioned earlier, when people put forward frameworks for evidencing the impact of an innovation they can be quite technical and they can require quite rigorous methodologies.

One of the things I've enjoyed is just giving innovators and programme teams the chance to take a bit of a step back and think about the questions that they really want to answer and how we can take first steps towards answering those questions.

Matthew Yeah. I agree, maybe taking it back a little bit from evidence for the donor and looking more at evidence for proving your impact and identifying that the innovation's working.

And I think for me what's been great, and maybe to steal a little bit of your point from earlier, is that we've moved also away from these purely number impact figures and we're looking very much at qualitative approaches and storytelling.

And as with all kinds of these innovations, until you reach scale it can be hard to see the quantitative impact, but the qualitative storytelling of innovation and the journey to have been on and the way that technology is facilitating positive change amongst disaster affected communities has been a really great way just to see our programme and move away from ticking boxes.

So thanks for coming in today, Lydia. It's been a really interesting conversation.



To remind listeners, today we also put out a report on this very topic, and it covers everything we've discussed and it lays out the framework and the tools that we're using here at the GSMA M4H programme to look at our evidence.

You'll be able to find the report wherever you're listening to this podcast, or also you can visit gsma.com/m4h where you'll find it in the resources section.