



WHAT WE LEARNT ABOUT LEARNING as a cohort of I Define Me! practitioners, and as funders and learning co-ordinators

May 2020

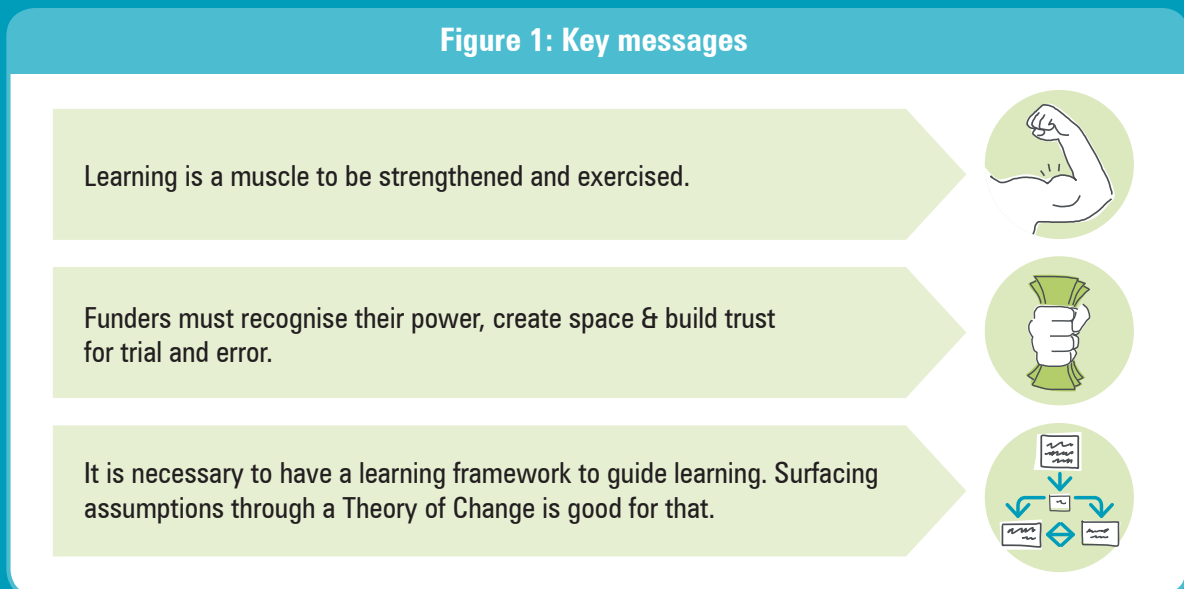
BACKGROUND

In 2017, Comic Relief awarded three-year funding to nine multi-partner initiatives in three countries (South Africa, the UK and Colombia), with a focus on supporting girls and young women (G&YW) affected by gangs. This was seen to include G&YW living in areas with high levels of gang activity, those vulnerable to criminal exploitation through gang affiliations and those actively taking part in and being criminally exploited by gangs. The distinct lack of practice, experience or learning around this issue in the broader sector led Comic Relief to set up the I DEFINE ME! (IDM) initiative. The central aim was to enable the funded organisations to explore approaches to working with G&YW affected by gangs and to develop individual and collective learning about effective ways to support and empower them in different contexts.

Comic Relief has a long record of encouraging and facilitating learning for and with those it funds. This has largely focussed in the past on investing in the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) capacity and systems of individual funded partners. Such organisations have been encouraged to identify their own appropriate and meaningful outcomes, indicators and learning questions, taking into account their capacities, resources and what makes sense for them and their project participants. Comic Relief further invited flexibility over the course of funding so that partners could change their approaches, budgets, outcomes and indicators based on project experience. However, in many cases, MEL still reverted to trying to ‘prove’ an initial vision of success over time. Conditioned over many years by funders’ requirements, organisations have come to see the ambitions they set in an implementation vacuum at the start of a project, as targets to be chased, even if these become increasingly irrelevant to their work’s context and realities. The tendency has therefore been for rigid MEL to crowd out actual learning from the analysis of relevant data and reflection on project experiences and challenges, thereby also limiting the adaptation of projects to be as effective as possible.

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Figure 1: Key messages



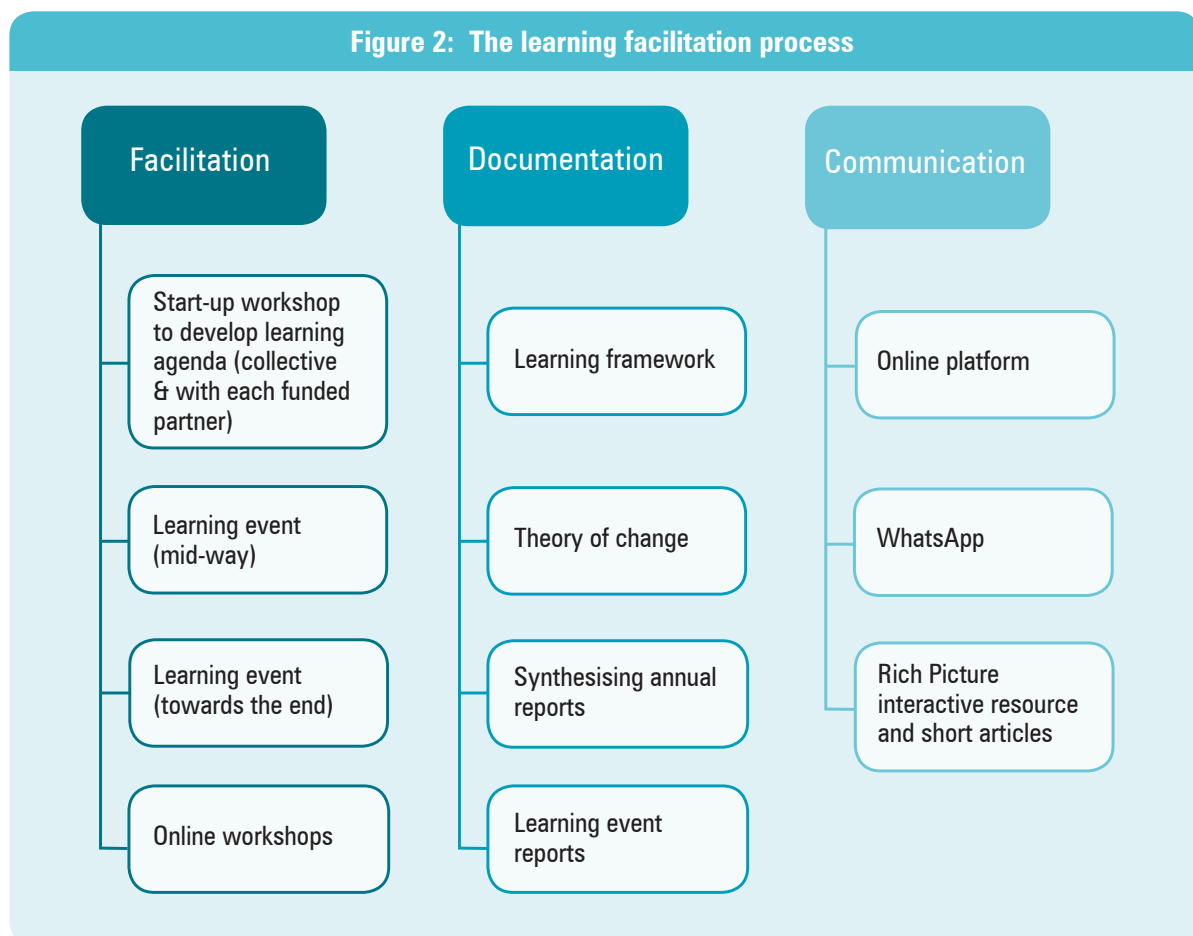
One of the aims of the IDM initiative was to create conditions in which projects and practitioners would have the impetus and support to learn and adapt their work individually and collectively as a learning cohort of projects. Learning facilitation was built into the initiative right from the start – and two organisations were appointed to co-ordinate learning through the process (Southern Hemisphere, a Cape Town-based development consultancy and Framework, a collective of consultants supporting the not-for-profit sector).

Opportunities were created outside of projects' hard-pressed work environments and deadlines to step back and refocus on the bigger picture. The assumption was that collective reflection, learning and exchange would support the projects' work with G&YW alongside their formal MEL. The focus fell on deepening, validating and valuing the practitioners' experiences, knowledge and understanding of the context and challenges of working with this particular group of G&YW over time, and pooling this across projects. Ultimately, the goal was to support IDM projects to navigate the complex contexts in which they worked and to continuously improve their support for G&YW. It was therefore important that frontline workers – those actually implementing the IDM projects – were involved in these processes of reflection and adaptation.

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THE PROCESS

The learning process was structured around three collective workshops over the course of the three-year period: once at the start in London, once after 18 months in Bogota and once towards the end of the period in Cape Town. Representatives from all projects (generally a mix of practitioners and managers from each project) came to each of these workshops, with each lasting 3 to 4 days. The rotation of geographical locations helped to foster the relationships amongst participants and grounded the workshop discussions in the realities of each country context. All workshops used creative, analytical and experiential techniques and participants helped to co-create the agendas and content for the mid-term and final workshops. Each workshop also included site visits to the local IDM projects, which participants greatly valued.



Around these three crucial face-to-face convenings, the learning co-ordinators kept an ongoing focus on collective learning through webinars, an online discussion platform (Basecamp) and individual discussions with funded partners every six months or so. The learning facilitators also prepared for and fed into these processes by analysing and reporting on relevant discussions and the six-monthly project reports provided by funded partners to Comic Relief. Learning was then documented in a series of communications products. Hence, the process included facilitation, synthesis research, documentation and communication (see Figure 2 above).

Across the three year period, the learning journey was broadly framed by the development (and subsequent refinement and redesign) of a broad, initiative-wide Theory of Change (ToC), which was created together with all projects at the kick-off workshop in London. See Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Overall theory of change for the 'I Define ME!' Project



“ Girls & young women who are gang affected are empowered to define their own lives and futures. ”

The overall ToC served as a foundation for developing a collective learning framework and formulating learning questions, which provided a basic structure for all learning activities across the three-year period. These are presented in Box 1 below.

Box 1: High-level learning questions for the IDM learning framework

A. CONTEXT

1. What can we learn to improve our understanding of the context and situation of gang-affected G&YW? (Also relates to relevance.)

B. HOW CHANGE HAPPENS? (What can we learn about how the intervention leads to the desired change, or how some outcomes lead to others, e.g. realising the need to change can result in G&YW becoming aspirational.)

2. **Design: What can we learn to improve our project design?** (This is specifically about intervention design (outputs and activities), methodologies used, amount/level of intervention, target groups, frontline workers.)
3. **Effectiveness: How effective are our interventions to bring about the desired changes/ outcomes?** What is working and why? What is not working and why not? (This is about identifying the drivers and change agents: are interventions creating the shift we want to see?)

C. WHAT CHANGE OCCURS?

4. **Outcomes: What are the observable outcomes emerging from the project?** Although more descriptive than analytical, it allows us to ask questions about the kinds of change emerging from our interventions – anticipated or unanticipated.

MAIN LEARNING INSIGHTS

Although the IDM initiative had learning and adaptation explicitly built into programme design, there were inevitably challenges to overcome. The learning co-ordinators had to be flexible and responsive to ensure that the learning process remained vital, meaningful and supportive of the projects' needs. Some of the main themes emerging from the learning journey are discussed briefly below.

ADDRESSING RIGID PLANNING BASED ON THE IDEA OF PREDICTABLE CHANGE

This initiative was launched with little prior experience of working with G&YW affected by gangs, although underpinned by an openness to experiment, test and adapt over time. To allow for flexibility, the projects' ToCs were not set in stone, and practitioners had scope to change activities, outcomes and indicators as they learnt more about their partners, participants and their contexts. It became evident that projects are often pushed to produce outcome results too fast and on the basis of too linear an understanding of change, rather than recognising that outcomes take time to emerge. The projects experienced the IDM approach as a new way of working: while they had a clear picture of what they wanted to achieve (overall outcomes of the collective and individual ToCs), they could navigate how to get there. They were actively encouraged and given space (outside the formal process of completing funder reports) to reflect and make changes to their activities and approaches according to their experiences. In this way, they could follow the pathways to change that worked rather than treating their initial ToCs as fixed blue-prints of implementation. As a result, they were able to develop girl-centred rather than paper-centred interventions.

HAVING TIME TO LEARN

The IDM initiative invested in learning events and ongoing learning co-ordination. The process created time to think – through face-to-face and online workshops and individual conversations with funded partners. The projects valued the time to stand back and reflect outside of daily work and outside of the annual funder reporting process. Learning sessions were quite spaced out, but occurred at critical points in the project cycle, so that there was enough to reflect meaningfully on together, without it feeling like they were constantly covering the same ground. This mirrored the pace of project implementation and change rather than forcing quick learning to emerge. The IDM practitioners experienced how valuable it was to make time to reflect with colleagues from the cohort. As a result, several projects established regular internal team reflection processes, including with frontline practitioners and senior managers to bring in different perspectives.

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LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

Most of the IDM practitioners, including the MEL staff, were not practised in learning and reflection, as their experience with monitoring and evaluation had primarily been accountability-focused, requiring more technical skills. The learning process was designed to help them develop more reflective, discursive practices. The learning co-ordinators deliberately did not direct individual projects' M&E systems or data collection and analysis. Instead, they facilitated learning discussions, valuing whatever information or data informed them, including project workers' observations, experiences, challenges and the formal data projects gathered. Demonstrating the usefulness of such discussions at a cohort level led to more reflective discussions at individual project level and a greater engagement with ensuring the relevance and focus of their own M&E systems.

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RETHINKING HOW TO SHOW SUCCESS

Working with G&YW affected by gangs was largely new to most of the organisations involved in IDM. The learning process helped practitioners to reflect on the design and effectiveness of their interventions by engaging with other projects using different approaches and learning from one another. Comic Relief, as the funder, did not push for large beneficiary numbers and encouraged depth over breadth. Some IDM projects even reduced their participant numbers as it became clear how intensively they would have to work with each girl or young woman. Interventions had to be trauma-informed and patient. Revising numbers downwards became desirable and optimal over scale. With their monitoring and evaluation, projects also had to learn to focus on capturing meaningful evidence of change, as opposed to measuring only quantitative output targets. Given the nature and complexity of the issues many of the G&YW were facing, many projects also started to recognise the importance and progress indicated by seemingly very small changes (such as a young woman asking for help or shifting from physical to verbal reactions when upset). They had to adjust their visions of change to match more realistic timelines, as well as these smaller indications of personal transformation from the G&YW.

FOCUSSING ON LEARNING OVER PERFORMANCE

Practitioners in funded projects can feel uncomfortable or compromised when asked to reflect on and reveal their mistakes and false-starts, rather than constantly proving their performance to funders. In the IDM initiative, Comic Relief explicitly assured projects that it was genuinely committed to learning and that practitioners really could engage in honest discussions evaluating their own work. The design and tone of the IDM learning process incentivised projects to focus on learning over a static image of performance. The practitioners were not accountable to Comic Relief for or about their learning – rather the funder and funded partners both embraced an emergent and fluid approach to learning over the course of the projects. Further, the learning process overall demanded little organisational time from the projects. In terms of money, the cost of the learning component was small relative to the overall budget, but the benefits were tremendous. Comic Relief saw far more strategic adaptations in project design and implementation in the IDM cohort than it traditionally sees from other funded partners.

SHIFTS IN ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

The IDM projects were funded to participate in the learning process; yet there is always a risk that such learning remains purely in the hands of individual project practitioners and fails to spread further within the organisations implementing those projects. Organisational structures and cultures are key variables affecting the uptake and use of learning, and as a funder of individual projects, Comic Relief could not force organisational learning. For most of the IDM projects, as with many organisations (both funders and funded partners), organisational learning was not fully embedded in their organisational cultures. They were used to working within a paradigm of upward accountability and project silos. Through the IDM process, practitioners started to experience the power and value of learning. Many took these practices back to their organisations and were able to introduce some approaches and practices across other areas of their organisations' work. For organisational learning to become properly embedded within participating organisations, however, further leadership and commitment is a requirement. There is also a need for a sector-wide effort to overcome the project fragmentation that characterises most organisations' work.

ADDRESSING POWER RELATIONS

The imbalance of power between funder organisations and the projects they fund can create obstacles to learning. Having external learning co-ordinators for the IDM initiative helped to address these power dynamics. Comic Relief did not facilitate the learning process; it asked the IDM projects' permission to attend the learning events and clarified that it would leave the room if asked to do so. It was, however, important for Comic Relief to be present and willing to learn with the participants, as this helped to establish an honest and trusting relationship and created the right conditions for learning. A 'contract' for learning was established during the first learning event, which was included in the learning framework. This helped to clarify group norms around learning, creating the basis for trust and equity among the group.

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CONCLUSIONS

All too often, learning in and across funded projects is crowded out by pre-existing paradigms of upwards accountability, projectised silos and rigid M&E that values 'proving' performance over learning and adaptation. Within this context, if funders are serious about supporting ongoing adaptation and improvement in their funded partners' work, they need to emphasise and invest proactively in learning as a dedicated process. This is a complex journey, which involves grappling with organisational and power dynamics, as well as the complexity of social change. However, the IDM experience has highlighted some key principles that can help to navigate at least some of these challenges (see Box 2).

Box 2: Principles to encourage learning

The IDM experience revealed the following important principles to encourage learning:

- Independence of learning facilitation from the projects and the funder.
- Focus on learning over pre-determined performance metrics or targets.
- Actively creating space and time for learning.
- Being conscious of power dynamics and diversity of participants.
- Enabling learning to emerge at the pace of project implementation, rather than setting rigid learning ambitions as an accountability requirement.
- Funders should be engaged and learn with the projects but be prepared to leave the room.
- Having fun and building trust – people must feel safe to learn.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This insights briefing is the result of a three-year learning process supported by Comic Relief, with Jake Grout-Smith and Anya Stern playing a leading role. The learning facilitators were instrumental in designing the learning process and extracting these insights. The learning facilitation team was led by Southern Hemisphere, and comprised Dena Lomofsky, Wilma Wessels, Elena Mancebo, Orla Cronin and Bill Sterland. This briefing was written by Erica Coetzee. Layout and design by Jaywalk Design. We would like to thank the IDM projects for their enthusiasm for learning.