



Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data

Innovation Fund Learning Session Report

Introduction

As part of the Collaborative Data Innovations for Sustainable Development Pilot Funding, which is supported by the World Bank's Trust Fund for Statistical Capacity Building (TFSCB), the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data (GPSDD) supports nine distinct projects in data production, dissemination and use, primarily in low-income and lower-middle-income countries. While these projects cover a variety of sectors and SDGs, their unifying goal is to encourage collaboration, experimentation, learning and capacity development in the field of sustainable development data, especially where needs are continuous or recurrent, and where innovations can be readily adapted to other regions and sectors. The projects vary in geographic base and scope, type of innovation, sector, expected outputs, target beneficiaries, and partnership models. However, all projects started implementation between April and August of 2017 for an 18-month period.

In order to gather insights and lessons learned to-date across projects that can inform understanding of the value of the fund and inform future decision-making, GPSDD hosted a one-day Innovation Fund Learning Session workshop on March 20th, 2018. This event took place approximately half-way through the funding cycle for the projects, providing an appropriate moment to reflect on success, challenges, and recommendations. The workshop brought together representatives from eight¹ of the nine Round 1 innovation fund projects, as well as representatives from the World Bank, DfID, and the GPSDD Secretariat. Leveraging the GPSDD Data for Development Festival in Bristol, the workshop took place one day before, providing project representatives an opportunity to attend the three days of the festival to further facilitate collaboration and learning in the data for development space.

Claire Melamed, the Executive Director of GPSDD explained the purpose and background to the Partnership - a global network seeking to maximize the positive impact of data on the progression of the Global Goals. She explained that the Innovation Fund is a very important initiative for the Partnership - as it will generate vital learning on how to best support innovation. The results of this event are important to the Partnership, as they are keen to learn about what is working and what isn't working, so that the next stage of this fund can be further improved, and so that other donors might be attracted to invest their resources and to grow the fund.

From the World Bank's Perspective, Grant Cameron explained, that the Bank is keen to hear the lessons being learned within the projects, and to identify where there may be potential for scalability and replicability. He set the tone for the day as being a learning exercise, and encouraged participants to be honest and reflective.

¹ While a representative from the ninth project did plan to attend, due to travel delays unfortunately missed the Learning Session, but contributed to the learnings through the pre-session questionnaire and project poster mentioned below.



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Objectives and Learning Questions

The workshop aimed to address the following objectives:

- Enable sharing and discussion among participants, and facilitate learning through hearing each other's experiences;
- Provide participants with the space to reflect on their work by identifying the successes and challenges of each project so far, and their potential for scalability;
- Begin to distill lessons learned across the projects to inform future funding decisions;
- Identify the role the fund has played in supporting these projects, and its broader contribution to innovation in data and reaching the Global Goals.

In order to address the objectives above, the workshop activities were structured to focus on the following five learning questions throughout the day:

1. Do these projects have the potential to change the way data are produced, managed and used on a regular basis?
2. Do these projects involve a suitable level of risk and experimentation, is it worth the reward?
3. This fund has asked for a collaborative approach to innovation - how is this working?
4. Do these projects have the potential to help better monitor and achieve the SDGs, and will their work affect the lives of ordinary people?
5. Has this fund made a positive contribution to innovation in development data?

What do we think Innovation is?

The group painted a picture of 'what innovation means to me.' They identified its key facets as being: experimentation; new ways to solve a problem; collaboration; a new concept; a new way to exploit data; thinking outside of the box; technical solutions (but not only); learning from failure; testing; scalable solutions; doing things differently and doing different things.

"Finding a new way to solve a problem; problems don't change much but the innovation is in finding a new way to give people what they want and to solve the problem their facing"

"Look from space where no one would expect that they can see something and then be useful for users"

"..more about extending knowledge and methods you have to new areas and new people."



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Project Overviews

Each project prepared a poster focused on how they are trying to change the way data are produced, managed or used; how the project will help better monitor or achieve the Global Goals; how the work affects real people; and information on geographic coverage and key partners and stakeholders. During the initial portion of the workshop, representatives from each project presented a brief overview of the work they have been doing, and the way in which the support of the Innovation Fund has enabled them to pursue this. Please refer to Annex A for project posters.

The nine projects are:

1. Machine Learning for Predicting Defaulter Risk in mHealth Systems
2. Leveraging the Informal Waste Ecosystem for Better Management of Post-Consumer Recyclable Waste in Urban India
3. Using Big Data and Weak-Signal Analysis to Counter Human Trafficking and IUU Fishing
4. Building Data Collaborative – Monitoring Global Goals and Supporting Health and WASH SDGs
5. Catalyzing Data-driven Market-based Solutions to Smallholder Farmer Fertilizer Uptake
6. Earth Observation Support for Monitoring and Reporting on Wetlands
7. Smart Water Monitoring and Alert with Rainfall Measurement from Telecommunication Networks
8. Mapping Night Time Fishing Activity in Southeast Asia
9. Dynamic Census – Sri Lanka

Some of the observations made by the presenters included:

- It is the ‘people’ issues that can be the most challenging, rather than the technical
- A common challenge has been getting people engaged, making the data work for their needs and convincing them that innovation doesn’t have to be a drain on their time
- Consistent and adequate internet coverage has been a common obstacle for many projects
- National statistics offices and other government departments have been varied in their enthusiasm for involvement with project, it is context specific
- In some cases, there has been a surprising level of enthusiasm and uptake by data users and frontline workers
- There is a common challenge of how to make projects sustainable over time, and to move on from the pilot phase to being within the mainstream
- There are legal barriers, both in relations to government and private companies that take time to assess and address

One project noted that it had been the young people in particular at the community level who had shown the greatest interest in innovative approaches and data. Another project shared how they had been surprised by the enthusiasm for start-up workshops, and the interest of the local authority.



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Risks

Has your work broken down barriers, forged new thinking or experimented with ways of doing things that haven't been tried before?

Did you have to take risks in order to do these things? What were these risks?

Did the way this funding was provided in any way affect your approach? Did it encourage risk taking? Did it hinder?

Participants shared their thoughts on the risks they have taken in their work so far, the barriers they have broken down and new ways of doing things they had tested. There were a number of commonalities, such as:

- the importance of gauging and adapting to user needs and ensuring that the data works for them;
- a little bit of bending the rules, in particular when working with governments;
- the risks implied in collaborating with others, which does not always go well and can lead to significant additional time investment;
- some projects have needed to take security risks due to challenging contexts in which they operate;
- there are risks in judging the capacity of the innovation and willingness of other stakeholders in implementing new ideas;
- the pressure to take an open data approach has carried some risks and required new way of communicating with stakeholders and not all collaborators have been comfortable with this, however it is enabling to say that it is a funder requirement
- design of the innovation and fit into the overall ecosystem – not just technology, but systems level thinking

It was broadly felt that the support from the Innovation Fund had permitted a flexibility of approach and had helped project leads to feel 'safe' to experiment. In particular, one participant mentioned that the focus on process more than final outcomes supported taking higher risk. Participants also indicated that this fund often helped build on prior knowledge and/or existing projects. Therefore, the structure and context of the funding had enabled more risk taking, testing and re-testing (iterative learning) and exploration of the right approaches with data users. The funding has allowed ability to prototype ideas and undertake research to strengthen innovations in progress. It has enabled participants to focus on the whole process and system in which they were operating rather than just the final outcomes of the project. One participant framed this as being 'willing to jump from higher' with the support of the Fund. It was noted that this type of flexible funding which permits systemic approaches to innovation is unusual.



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Reflection on Successes and Challenges

Participants did an exercise to reflect on successes and challenges of their work, and identified which of these had been expected and unexpected. In addition, project participants completed a pre-session questionnaire that also asked about factors of successes, challenges, and ability to scale, as well as key lessons learned, which have been incorporated into the highlights below. There were more challenges overall than successes, which the group concluded was due to the stage that the projects were at - having just gone through start-up, and only recently entered into full implementation mode.

“The need to provide low cost solutions can trigger some very innovative and revolutionary thinking.”

Expected challenges ranged from the difficulties of gaining visibility for the work they were doing, practical obstacles of local logistics and lack of internet access, to the conflicting demands, needs and protocols of different data stakeholders. One participant shared that access to open and secondary data sources had been challenging, that these were essential in order to build up a full picture, but that this challenge was not surprising given the context within which they were working. Another participant shared that they had faced challenges as the grant has not provided the staff capacity required to reach out to communities to encourage their buy-in in the data project.

Unexpected challenges ranged from the multiplicity of different data initiatives, to reticence among district level actors to share data for fear of national level scrutiny (and consequent judgements about their performance), to huge scale-up and the challenge of meeting demand, and then some resistance to absorbing prototypes into recipient institutions. One more surprising obstacle shared by a participant was the reticence in many parts of the development community for using quantitative data and a scientific approach to exploring evidence. Another was that local authorities feel nervous of national government making judgements about their performance, which makes them reticent about sharing their data openly. One project also pointed out the unexpected challenge of having a longer turn-around time in developing an agreement with private sector companies on data sharing and use.

Expected successes were largely covered in project proposal documents, but included appetite for the particular products being developed, exploitation of new data sources, and expansion of pilot efforts to a larger scale. One project shared their very positive collaboration with government and officials’ high enthusiasm for their data approach - because the project outputs have clear utility for the government agricultural extension workers. In general, partnerships and collaboration, especially with local organizations was mentioned by multiple participants. Additional factors of success noted included, having adequate staffing and technical capacity on the team, building on existing projects or initiatives, and ensuring a user-centered design and approach to the innovations.

“User-centered design should always inform product/service design, not availability of new technologies/tools.”

“Confirmation that technical data and various hidden data from the telecom networks can become information relevant for SDGs”



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Unexpected successes ranged from a new town asking to join in with the project early on (and therefore a doubling of impact very quickly), validation from farmers (data users) giving positive feedback on how useful and practicable the data has been, to seeing the huge potential of data from the informal sector being leveraged and having an impact on municipal policy and practice. One participant shared that a significant trusted partnership had enabled the project to make good progress despite set-backs.



Potential for our work to go to scale

*How could you imagine the work supported by this fund going to scale?
How would this happen?*

The vision of scale for each project will be unique, depending on the context, nature of the innovation, the level of investment and the ambition, but approaches could include:

- Either vertical or horizontal scale-up - the appropriate approach should be carefully chosen according to context, investment, type of innovation
- Engaging in advocacy, to encourage government actors to support and use your approach or product
- It was noted that once governments support an approach or innovation, they can take it to scale with the help of donor funds
- Working more effectively through networks, optimizing or extending them, and influencing others' practices
- Finding a model of sustainability
- Scale can be reached by becoming the new 'standard', the norm or good practice



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One of the participants shared how their project was already reaching a scale they had not anticipated, as they had started to facilitate the integration of informal systems within the city's formal data and planning systems.

Things that would be needed in order to take work to scale include:

- Data champions within country or in the local community that could drive for the right conditions for scale
- A strong data infrastructure within the country. One participant shared that the challenges in the local context have been huge as access to the internet has been constrained.
- Some basic IT and technical necessities, such as cell phone coverage
- One participant suggested that a 'Chief Hustler Officer' would be a great asset - someone that can build relationships with public officials and other stakeholders
- Data needs to be of a sufficient quality to share at greater scale
- More funding needs to be available to support going to scale
- Strong network of relevant stakeholders (such as key officials, civil society organizations) is required, including leadership and training
- Partnerships with and buy-in from local government and private sector stakeholders
- Strong learning approaches to ways of working, and how to bring about change successfully is needed, including connecting with academia and policy stakeholder to share results

“Importance of collaborating with the local supporting organization, who can be a medium between data-driven innovation and development practice.”

It was also reflected on that, despite the natural appetite to try and go to scale and to have bigger impact, it is also valid to keep some initiatives small and focused. It was useful to reflect on what 'scale' means and how to ensure the Fund makes the right and most helpful expectations of grantees in terms of going to scale.

Implications for future funding rounds.

Project representatives were pleased with the event and benefited from the peer learning opportunity. The event helped the GPSDD & World Bank to develop a richer qualitative understanding of the progress the “Round 1” projects have been making, in addition to the deliverable-based monitoring that has taken place to date. To inform future funding rounds, we would highlight five lessons drawn from the above:

- *Similar in-person or virtual gatherings should be built into future funding rounds.* This in-person learning event was valuable for project representatives, GPSDD and Bank staff. It appeared to help participants feel a closer connection to the projects' objectives, challenges, and successes and is likely to make everyone involved a better advocate for the work, and to spot opportunities for it to be applied in new contexts. The World Bank and GPSDD both stated a



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commitment to support project partners to ‘join the dots’ - making more connections between them and creating a community of practice between funded partners.

- *Future rounds should continue to seek novel projects and use deliverable-based funding.* The nature and modality of the funding has been well received. The World Bank’s TFSCB innovation window appears to be rare among funding sources willing to finance riskier projects related to development data. The flexibility of funding linked to milestones and deliverables as opposed to fixed disbursement dates, was also appreciated given the levels of uncertainty in some projects.
- *Seeking “open” and collaborate proposals appears to encourage systemic innovation.* Funded projects were required to open their data (subject to privacy considerations) and develop open source tools. This allows new innovations to be developed on the back of the existing innovations. This also ensured that all collaborators in an operational project bought into the open approach. However, there were examples of users and governments resisting openness, in one instance, citing concerns about data quality.
- *Scaling can occur in many dimensions, scaling locally appears promising for innovation work, but may be undervalued.* Scaling approaches within a country (vertical scaling) is likely to be easier than scaling approaches across countries (horizontal scaling) but is arguably just as valuable in the long run both in terms of expanding the coverage of new data and services, as well as establishing standards and good practices. The Bank and GPSDD should ultimately seek to connect relevant projects at different scales and maturity levels with larger government or development organization-financed activities.
- *A greater emphasis on user-centric approaches is likely to improve adoption of new approaches.* There remains a longer-term challenge of not fully being aware of if/when the final users will incorporate new approaches into their toolkits / decision-making process. One of the projects results in new rainfall data which can feed into hydrological models for predicting events, but low technical capacity among users may limit uptake of the data and methods for these purposes. Having more explicit user involvement in all new collaborations that are funded would help address these issues.