

# Setting new standards for better MEL

## Lessons for grantees & funders

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# About and acknowledgements

The Economic Justice Program (EJP) of the Open Society Foundations ran from 2018 until the end of December 2021. During this time and building on the work of its two parent programs (Fiscal Governance and Economic Advancement), EJP developed the Foundations' first-ever strategy dedicated to fighting economic injustice and advanced approaches to good grantmaking for social change.

**This brief shares insights from the efforts of EJP's Strategy & Impact Unit to develop a focused, principles-driven approach to monitoring and evaluation—one that balances donor demands for accountability with evidence-based learning to help agents of change deliver long-term, collective impact. We have also published a carefully curated toolkit to accompany our reflections. This can be found at: [www.betterevaluation.org/tools-resources/grantee-mel-toolkit](http://www.betterevaluation.org/tools-resources/grantee-mel-toolkit)**

This learning brief and the lessons within would not have been possible without the EJP's Strategy & Impact Unit, its forerunners on the Fiscal Governance Program's MEL team, and the grantees who helped to shape and reshape these efforts over the years. Particular thanks to Jay Locke, Robin Varghese, and Stephanie Lucas, and to the program's MEL fellows—Yuko Koshiba, Sheyra Murali, Isadora Mota do Amaral, Jason West, and Liza Paudel. The lessons in this brief draw on our experiences and reflections over the past five years, as well as valuable insights from independent evaluations by [Intention 2 Impact](#) (2021), [Synergos](#) (2020), and [FSG](#) (2017). Finally, we are grateful to Alice Macfarlan at BetterEvaluation for facilitating the publication of this brief and its accompanying toolkit.

If you'd like to learn more about the insights in this brief, contact Andrea Azevedo. For more reflections from the Economic Justice Program, take a look at our other learning briefs: '[Making sense of a strategy that never was](#)', '[Funding for a healthier civil society](#)', and '[Looking in the equity & inclusion mirror](#)'.

**This is not an official Open Society Foundations publication; the views within are the authors' own and do not represent the views of the organization.**

# A status quo that serves no one

In the field of global development and human rights, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) is most often designed and driven by donors.<sup>1</sup> It is typically viewed as a means to hold grantee partners accountable to funding conditions and objectives,<sup>2</sup> and in many cases serves to consolidate donor control over spending—especially when tied to scheduled payments. Unfortunately, most of these practices have little to do with achieving the greatest impact or improving partner resilience. And along with many other problems, it reduces trust and openness, which only diminishes reporting accuracy and transparency. This is detrimental to evidence and learning on all sides, leaving donors—who are typically far removed from the action—making guesses based on shaky data.

By 2016, the Open Society Foundations had agreed that they wanted to resist the narrow, accountability-oriented idea of MEL, but were a long way from a cohesive, network-wide approach or commitment. Perhaps more fundamentally, debate raged on internally about whether MEL had any value or role at all in the Foundations’ quest to build and support vibrant, tolerant, and open societies. Amid vocal skepticism from those who have seen or experienced poor and disrespectful MEL practices, the organization was struggling to identify or formalize internal requirements and dedicated resources. Individual programs were left to define, fund, and action their own MEL plans (few ever did; some still haven’t).

In 2016, MEL staff within the Foundations Fiscal Governance Program (FGP) set out to reshape donor–grantee MEL dynamics in the hope of enabling greater systemic change. Early on, it was clear that grantee partners faced common challenges when it came to developing an effective and right-sized approach to MEL; a review of grantee MEL capacity revealed that few were integrating and leading smart evaluation and learning approaches, and most lacked staff, resources, and data quality, and management systems. But what we also saw in our 2016 review were people and organizations that were tireless in their pursuit of long-term social change—and enthusiastic for approaches that would help them in this mission. By supporting grantees and the wider field to evaluate the work they were doing, to understand what was and wasn’t working, the right kind of MEL could help partners on both sides to “do good, better.” The challenge was how to get there.



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[Increased organizational capacity for MEL] is a big piece of what FGP worked on with us and it has been really, really useful. I think generally it is an important skill that NGOs and other grantees want to build....

**Grantee, I2I interview (2021) for FGP evaluation**

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1 In this brief, “donors” refers to both private grantmakers and public institutions but focuses primarily on the former.

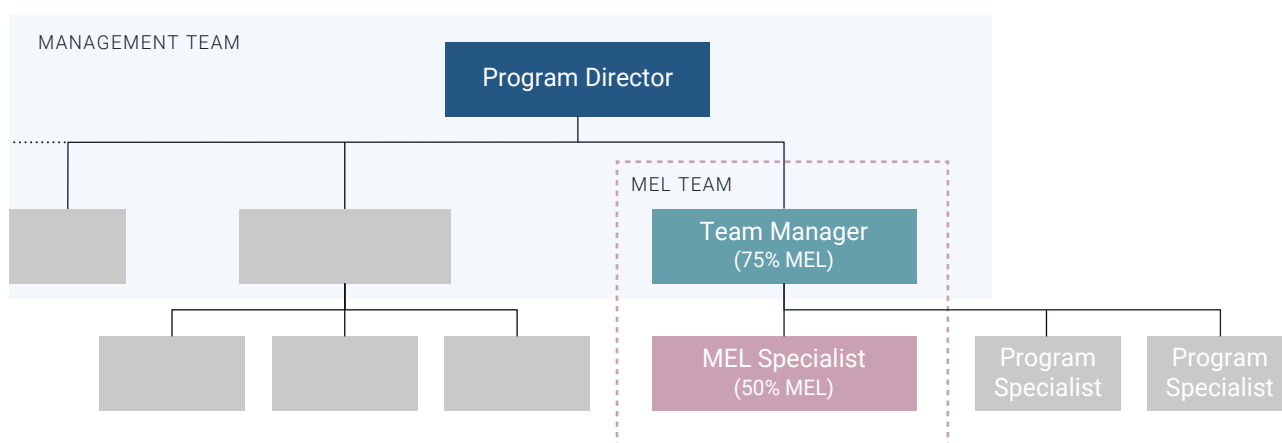
2 Itad & nef Consulting, *Investing in Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning: Issues for NGOs* (London: Bond, 2014) [www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/investing\\_in\\_mel.pdf](http://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/investing_in_mel.pdf).

# Our journey towards better MEL

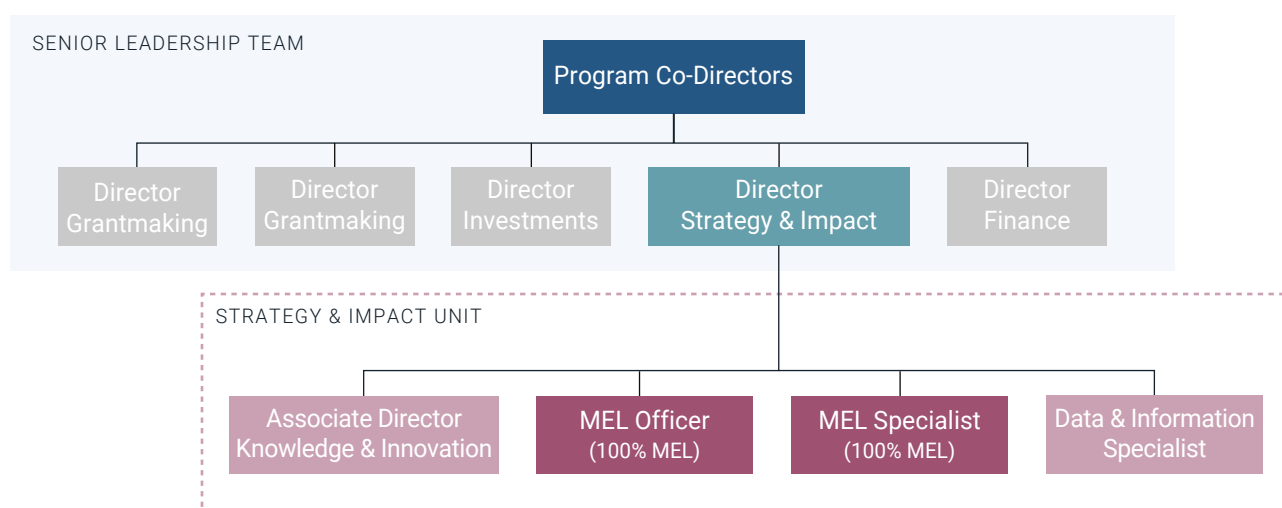
FGP had its own Learning Officer and set of MEL practices in place from as early as 2013, and by 2016, the program had begun to invest significant time, expertise, and resources into its MEL function and support. These efforts continued under the new Economic Justice Program (EJP), formed through a merger between FGP and the Economic Advancement Program in 2019.<sup>3</sup> EJP senior leadership recognized MEL as a vital “enabler” for achieving impact across EJP’s wider work and in contributing to the economic justice field. EJP established its own Strategy & Impact Unit (Figure 1), which took on the task of developing the program’s inaugural strategy, MEL framework, and practices.

**Figure 1: Evolution of the FGP/EJP MEL team (2016–21)**

## FGP MEL team (2016–18)



## EJP Strategy & Impact Unit (2019–21)



3 The activities discussed in this learning brief were initiated by FGP (2016–18) and continued under the newly formed EJP (2019–21). For simplicity, we refer primarily to the program as “EJP” throughout the remainder of the document.

When we set out on our journey towards better MEL, our aims were to:

- strengthen grantee capacity to do “right-fit” MEL;
- increase grantees’ commitment to integrating MEL within their work;
- better equip grantees to make the case for the MEL agenda that they felt was right in their discussions with other donors and partners;
- improve how we, as a program, were doing MEL;
- contribute to filling the gaps in tools, practices, and infrastructure within the field.

As one donor among many, we knew that the type of transformative change we wanted would only happen if others took on these commitments too. Our hope was that these investments in MEL would not only support our grantees and the wider economic justice field to have greater impact and be more resilient but would also enable us to better understand and influence change beyond our direct control—including the practices of other funders.

Inspired by the concept of principles-focused evaluation, we developed a set of values that would be our compass (Box 1), helping us to ensure that MEL practices served both organizational needs and long-term systems change. These values, which we validated with grantees in 2017 and again in 2019, articulated the scale of our ambition and the standards to which we would hold ourselves.



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Principles inform and guide decisions and choices. Principles-driven people are motivated by deeply held values expressed through principles that translate values into behaviors. Principles-focused evaluation makes principles the focus of evaluation.

**Michael Quinn Patton<sup>4</sup>**

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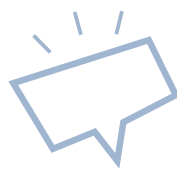
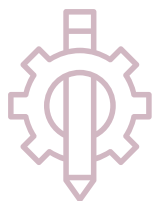
At the same time, we had to recognize the realities and tensions that faced us (Box 2), as a funder working on some of the world’s most “wicked” problems—e.g., corporate influence over policy and economic inequality. These are issues that, by their nature cannot be “fixed” over a single decade, let alone a single grantmaking period.

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4 Michael Quinn Patton, *Principles-Focused Evaluation: The GUIDE* (New York: Guilford Press, 2017).

## Box 1: EJP's guiding MEL values

- **Demand driven:** We will respond to clear demands from staff, grantees, and the broader field that answer real questions of practical use and import.
- **Rigorous, participatory, and method-agnostic:** We will consider a wide spectrum of methods and voices as valid sources of reflection, learning, and evidence.
- **Fit for purpose:** We will emphasize the importance of adapting to context, power dynamics (acting as a donor/investor), and differing levels of capacity.
- **Externally relevant:** We will prioritize external knowledge-building, creation, and sharing beyond our own narrow uses.
- **Patient:** We work towards long-term, systemic change. We will keep our expectations of “progress” and “success” reflective of the messy, long-term, and political realities it will take to make these changes.
- **A friend of failure:** We will excitedly embrace the value and role of failure in iterating interventions, policies, and programs.
- **Humble:** We will acknowledge and thank those who have paved the way before us and will always note that as the donor or investor, we are not usually the ones doing the hard work.
- **Openhanded:** Recognizing that perennial problem of the philanthropic “black box” (where information goes in, but rarely comes back out), we will share our MEL data, knowledge, and learning with partners, grantees, investees, and the wider public.
- **Resource conscious:** We will consider, develop, and leverage existing knowledge and research.



## Box 2: Realities and tensions

**An overarching skepticism of the value of MEL dominates** conversation and practice in the economic justice and fiscal governance sectors. **The misconception that work in human rights and governance fields is unmeasurable was—and still is—fairly common.** The focus of MEL on “results” stands in sharp contrast to the reality of slow, uneven, and sometimes backwards moving progress in fields focused on rights and systems.

Bad experiences with ill-suited evaluation approaches, often insisted upon and paid for by donors, has led many in the economic justice field to be wary and even distrustful of MEL. As a result of underinvestment, overreliance on perceptions, and a lack of know-how **few complexity-sensitive MEL methods have been adapted to or taken up by the economic justice field** even as the past decade has introduced an incredible array of new approaches.

**Good MEL requires time, resources, and skills**—things that are often in short supply for social change actors. MEL capacity varies significantly across organizations and is difficult for many to build. **Good MEL also requires interest in what *isn't* working as much as what *is*** to maximize our positive impact and minimize the negative.

**Funders generally do very limited direct change work;** grantmaking (and investing) is the primary mechanism through which we hope to achieve change. **And therefore, funders are almost entirely reliant on grantee MEL** in order to understand what impact our resources have in the world and how we can improve our own practice.

**There is an inevitable power imbalance** between grantees and funders that is present in every ask or interaction, few more so than when it comes to demonstrating how money was spent and what it achieved. This creates **an understandable desire among grantees to always “show your best”** (and a reluctance to admit “failure”) so as to not jeopardize funding.

**Much of grantee MEL practice is born out of a need to provide regular reports to donors,** with resources invested accordingly. As a result, approaches and infrastructure tend to reflect a particular type of upward accountability-oriented MEL. This type of superimposed donor MEL rarely prioritizes learning for adaptation and can make MEL activities feel like policing instead of supporting greater positive impact.

# How did we do?

A 2020/21 independent close-out evaluation of FGP (which covered the program’s eight years and \$142.6 million in giving to nearly 130 organizations), suggested that our investment in and commitment to MEL may be one of the greatest legacies of our work. External actors—including funder peers—felt that our work significantly raised the bar for MEL practice (and what grantees could expect from donors), both within individual organizations and across the field. Our efforts to directly engage other donors were noted as being especially helpful in this regard, particularly sharing our thinking and practice, pushing for greater alignment on reporting requirements and asks, and responding to requests from fellow funders to help with their own practices.

From our own perspective, we saw a notable (and near-universal) improvement in the MEL capacity of our grantees. Organizations were commissioning and using evaluations, bringing more technical, “hard” MEL skills into their staff teams (through training and/or recruitment), and developing and implementing more precise measurement plans. Meanwhile, within the program, MEL went from being an afterthought in grant discussions and decision making to one of the most important components of program officer conversations with grantees.



We’ve seen improvement in our grantees’ MEL practices over time, as reflected in the internal MEL capacity assessments we do.

**EJP MEL team member,  
interview with independent consultant (2021)**

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Our journey towards better MEL had as much to do with changing hearts and minds as it did with pursuing specific MEL practices. This meant dispelling myths, accounting for failures, and questioning whose agenda takes priority. Within OSF, MEL is no longer a dirty word among those who once shuddered at its mention. And we are confident that, in demonstrating the essential role of MEL in the quest for open societies, our work will have a lasting legacy in the wider field.



The support they provide to learning and evaluation, both financial support and capacity building, is huge and not something you see elsewhere necessarily. It helps organizations be more effective and more reflective, and I do think it has ripple effects on the field; I think it changes what other donors are doing.

**Funder, I2I interview (2021) for FGP evaluation**

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# Our approaches to better MEL



## Approach 1

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### **Recognizing and rebalancing power through improved communications and reporting**

#### **The status quo**

There is an inevitable power imbalance between those receiving funding and those providing it; grantees need something that donors have and could choose to take elsewhere. But rather than acknowledging these power dynamics and taking practical steps to avoid their most toxic consequences, traditional grantmaking practices can exacerbate and even exploit them—whether knowingly or not. Communication is often one-way; grantees may be expected to share information about their strategies, budgets, and workplans, but funders rarely reciprocate. Reporting and MEL, meanwhile, are almost always a conditionality of funding that prioritizes individual donor needs and demands grantees do the heavy lifting.

Funders do very little direct change work, and so rely on grantee MEL to understand the impact of their resources in the world. Usually, each funder will require grantees to report against a prescribed set of outcomes and indicators, so that they can track their own strategic priorities in a way that's easy for them to aggregate across a portfolio of grants or investments. But this prescriptive, funder-first approach creates a lot of work for grantees and an effort–reward asymmetry, with grantees doing MEL that lacks any relevance for their own strategic outcomes or programming.

Given these power dynamics, the understandable desire among grantees to “always show their best” can quickly become fear that any admission of “failure” will jeopardize support. Grantee MEL often ends up being a performative box-ticking exercise that emphasizes achievements and hesitates to admit when things haven't worked. But in a field that tackles some of the world's greatest social challenges, where progress takes place over decades and some degree of failure inevitable, this approach forfeits genuine learning on all sides.

#### **EJP's approach**

We set out to create systems and structures that acknowledged but never exploited power dynamics and gave all partners a say. Reporting was a key part of this, but we also focused more broadly on building trust, respect, and more open communication to help rebalance power at different moments throughout the relationship.



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We found that simply sharing and clarifying information was a significant and often necessary first step towards rebalancing power

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## Making big changes to reporting

Traditional reporting wasn't really working for our program officers, and in **listening to grantees** we quickly established that it wasn't working for them either. Our 2016 analysis found that even requirements that seemed "flexible and clear" to our program officers were a minefield of uncertainty for partners—including those that were receiving large, general support grants with an evergreen commitment. Grantees were spending months of staff time on reporting for all their donors, using prescribed templates that meant creating bespoke styles and content for each of their donors, even in cases of core support. Program officers, meanwhile, were unaware of just how much time grantees were putting into the process and how faithfully they were following our reporting template (which wasn't especially important to us). As a result, program officers often failed to read many grantee reports at all.

We used this information to make two significant shifts in our approach to reporting. First, **we scrapped the single reporting template** and instead provided grantees with a "menu" of different reporting options, mapped according to the time/effort needed to do them and their potential learning outcomes for grantees and for program officers. We refocused our reporting expectations to discuss outcomes, learning, and adaptation, and found a variety of reporting methods could serve these priority interests. For example, grantees could opt to use one of our newly created templates, have a discussion with us, or share reports that they had prepared for other donors or their own boards. Making such a significant change was far from simple (Box 3), but the feedback we received from grantees and donor colleagues during our pilot roll-out reassured us it was the right one.

In so much of our grantmaking practice, we found that simply **sharing and clarifying information** was a significant and often necessary first step towards rebalancing power (see also our [learning brief on organizational health funding](#)). We therefore accompanied the reporting menu with clear guidance at the outset, making the implicit *explicit*, so that grantees could make informed decisions that best suited their needs and preferences. This helped reduce uncertainty and improve trust.

### **Box 3: Making the case for change**

EJP was just one program in a much bigger organization. In changing our approach to grantee reporting, we often had to check—and sometimes challenge—OSF’s institutional compliance requirements. This meant distinguishing between what was a mandatory minimum and what was simply “the way it’s always been done.” It involved a considerable amount of work, in part due to OSF’s lobbying support mechanism under 501(c)(4) and its globally distributed pools of grant funding, each with unique requirements and obligations. Nor were these changes solely procedural: the move towards a more flexible, less prescriptive approach to grantee reporting requirements was also a cultural shift that required buy-in from program officers. We did considerable groundwork, gathering evidence from grantees, program officers, and OSF compliance officers to make the case for change and show that it was possible.

Our second big shift away from mainstream donor approaches was to commit to **never asking grantees to conform to a prescribed set of outcomes or indicators**. As a funder, far removed from the action, we needed grantees to be doing good MEL so that we could do good MEL. But providing grantees with a set of onerous data requirements that prioritized our specific interests was antithetical to the culture within EJP, which valued grantee agency and autonomy, and strived to offer partners greater flexibility. Instead, we asked that all grantees develop their own MEL framework that covered the basic “ingredients” of good MEL: outcomes and indicators identified by them (*not* by us), their chosen data sources, and a clear theory of change. See also Box 11 in Approach 4 of this brief.

The decision not to prescribe indicators had significant implications for our team internally. It meant that the information we received from grantees would not be uniform, immediately comparable, or in line with EJP’s outcome framework; when it came to data aggregation and analysis, the EJP team would need to do much more of the work. To make this process more manageable, we **devised a new approach that involved using “outcome baskets,”** bundles of similar grantee-reported data that we could use to answer questions about our own outcomes of interest (Box 4).

#### Box 4: Identifying indicators for EJP's MEL framework

In developing our own MEL framework to help us understand FGP/EJP's impact, we identified several types of indicators for our outcomes of interest and prioritized effective use of resources and existing information. Most of the selected indicators relied on data submitted by grantees and contractors or other secondary data sources (e.g., Open Budget Index). But without imposing our outcomes and indicators on grantees, we had to be creative in using and applying reported data from grantees.

In some cases, where data quality and accuracy were strong, we decided to directly adopt a grantee-identified indicator as our own (i.e., use it as a primary means for assessing progress towards EJP outcomes of interest). But this still left considerable gaps that couldn't be filled by secondary data and would be very expensive to collect as primary data. So, we came up with another solution: "outcome baskets."

Looking across grants and our outcomes of interest, we identified between two and five relevant grantee indicators that best spoke to the scope, scale, and ambition of our targeted outcomes, and bundled them into "outcome baskets." Program officers could then distill key observations from these baskets, with support from the EJP MEL team to assess progress and learning most relevant to each outcome. Information would flow into outcome baskets at different times depending on different reporting timelines, and so we planned to do a light-touch review each quarter followed by a more formal aggregate analysis annually.

[Explore our full set of indicators here.](#)

## Building trust and mutual respect

We endeavored to **integrate better communications throughout all of our grantmaking practices** to encourage trust, respect, and openness on all sides. This meant sharing more, more openly, and more explicitly. These efforts took many forms and included:

- **Publicly sharing our own strategies.** In 2018, for the first time in OSF's history, we publicly shared [FGP's abridged strategy](#). Two years later, we went a step further and invited grantees and other partners to review and, if they wished, provide feedback on unpolished drafts of the inaugural EJP strategy (see our learning brief 'Making sense of a strategy that never was').
- **Deferring to grantee expertise** when designing grants and inviting them to co-lead projects with us (see, e.g., the Fiscal Governance Indicators Project, in Approach 6). We often thought of success in these interactions as the number of times folks pushed back, disagreed with, or even interrupted us.
- **Creating spaces and mechanisms through which grantees could provide feedback on us** and evaluate how our support was or wasn't helping them to advance their mission or vision (via formal external evaluations, for example).

- **Establishing grants to support and celebrate failure** and its role in systems change efforts (including organizational and peer-to-peer learning grants).
- **Explicitly acknowledging power dynamics in conversations with grantees**, and addressing information asymmetry wherever possible, and advocating for other funders to do the same. For example, we attended Accountable Now’s annual workshop where we presented early lessons from our efforts to shift power from funders to grantees.
- **Working as peers**, building relationships between our MEL team and grantee MEL representatives/practitioners that focused on the practice of MEL and evaluative thinking (Approach 3), beyond grantmaking and accountability.
- **Continuing the conversation.** At the invitation of one grantee, we joined discussions and spoke on this topic at an event in London, and paid for two representatives from other grantee organizations in Kenya and Nigeria to attend and share their own perspectives.

### Box 5: Coordinating donor demands

We recognized that our reporting asks and expectations were part of a much larger cycle of repetitive, resource-intensive, and often performative reporting. Grantees have to go through the same process in different formats for multiple donors. Yet we also knew that many peer funders provided similar support to the same organizations; surely, we could coordinate our reporting requirements to lessen the burden of bespoke reporting on grantees? We discussed with other donors the possibility of developing common guidelines, timelines, and even joint MEL frameworks for our mutual grantees. Overall progress was limited, largely as a result of individual teams’ limited influence over organizational templates inside funding institutions and the difficulty of maintaining momentum during negotiations that got deep into the weeds.<sup>5</sup>

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5 Transparency & Accountability Initiative, *Collaboration Case Note: Aligned Reporting* (2019) [www.transparency-initiative.org/collaboration-case-note/5032/aligned-reporting-collaboration-case-note](http://www.transparency-initiative.org/collaboration-case-note/5032/aligned-reporting-collaboration-case-note).



## Approach 2

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# Designing our own MEL systems and practices

### The status quo

We knew when we started this journey that we needed to walk the walk when it came to MEL. That meant being able to monitor, evaluate, and learn from our *own* successes and failures. In 2016, FGP had minimal MEL systems, outcome measurement plans or experience, and lacked clear and measurable goals. There was a program-level theory of change in place, but team members found it too abstract, academic, and broad to be useful in instructing or reviewing work; there were no theories of change for individual portfolios. The program team also had very little exposure to or previous experience with MEL, either within the Foundations or before joining, a symptom of the lack of robust MEL in the governance, human rights, and policy communities. When FGP chose to hire a MEL manager in 2016, they were one of only two staff at the Foundations with expertise in and mandate to work on MEL. Without any models or standards to use from within OSF, we were largely starting from scratch.

### EJP's approach

We began by developing a joint understanding within the team of what the program was doing and what we wanted to achieve—in other words, a clear and evaluable strategy.<sup>6</sup> We reflected seriously on **our role and the extent to which (and how) we were contributing** to grantees and the wider field (both positively and negatively).<sup>7</sup> Early on, we agreed that grantee outcomes were outside our sphere of control and their successes not ours to claim. Instead, we identified *our* clearest direct levers for change, which were: (1) the decisions we made when it came to allocating resources and choosing partners; and (2) our immediate contributions through, for example, technical assistance, convening, and research.

Our hypothesis was that grantee success, responsiveness, and adaptiveness were correlated to *how* we provided grants—that is, their duration, level of flexibility, reporting requirements, and more. We also suspected that the organizational support we provided alongside programmatic grants mattered too. But in both cases, external evidence was mixed; any MEL system we put in place would need to establish progress towards our long-term goals for systems change *and* deliver insights on the extent to which our actions and decisions played a role in moving the needle.

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6 We undertook two comprehensive strategy design processes between 2016 and 2021—first as FGP and later as EJP. See our learning brief for further [insights into the EJP strategy development process](#).

7 This question of contribution later featured prominently in our external program evaluations.

We **embedded evaluative thinking** throughout the strategy development process (Box 6), asking ourselves critical questions about how change happens at the very outset (see our strategy learning brief). Recognizing that meaningful progress towards our vision would involve many factors and take considerable time, our program and portfolio strategies developed both **longer-term “North Stars”** to guide our work beyond a single strategy cycle and theories of change that connected these North Stars to **near-term goals, milestones, and indicators**. Portfolio teams worked to develop these theories of change alongside their strategies, with support from a MEL “buddy” within the S&I Unit. Our theories of change did not shy away from complex realities; the final products were messy and lengthy, but so were the changes we were seeking. And for the first time, program officers had a comprehensive picture of what the portfolio was trying to achieve and why, the assumptions it relied upon, and what markers of progress would tell us we were on the right track.

### **Box 6: What is evaluative thinking?**

“Evaluative thinking is a cognitive process in the context of evaluation, motivated by an attitude of inquisitiveness and a belief in the value of evidence, that involves skills such as identifying assumptions, posing thoughtful questions, pursuing deeper understanding through reflection and perspective taking and making informed decisions in preparation for action.”<sup>8</sup>

Once we had our strategy in place, we undertook an **external baseline evaluation**—an OSF first.<sup>9</sup> This gave us a qualitative picture of the situation within our chosen areas of work as well as an early indication of how our support was perceived by grantees and the wider field. It not only provided a baseline against which to monitor progress and eventually evaluate our efforts, but it also helped us to make our strategy clearer and more evaluable throughout its implementation. For example, the findings from the baseline data collection pushed us to articulate an implicit program-level goal, which was previously missing—our team’s commitment to field building. We undertook a summative evaluation of FGP’s programmatic work, after the program closed in 2020/21, to explore outcomes, contribution, grantmaking practices, and field support activities in much greater detail. We also commissioned additional evaluations and learning reviews on specific issues or initiatives, like the program’s work on beneficial ownership and anti-corruption.

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8 Thomas Archibald, 2013. “Evaluative Thinking?” (Free Range Evaluation, November 18)  
<https://tgarchibald.wordpress.com/2013/11/11/18>

9 The external baseline evaluation for the FGP strategy happened in 2017; a similar baseline evaluation was planned for the EJP strategy. When FGP and the Economic Advancement Program merged to become EJP, we took the lessons learned from the FGP baseline evaluation into our design of EJP’s strategy.



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We integrated MEL practices into every stage [of the strategy development process], using brainstorming sessions to discuss causal relationships and system shifts; including probing questions about how change happens in case templates; and having MEL buddies for each of the groups that developed the final portfolios.

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*EJP, Making Sense of a Strategy That Never Was (2022)*

The Strategy & Impact Unit **adopted and encouraged a “learning mindset.”** This meant recognizing that our assumptions are sometimes wrong, that contexts continually evolve, and that iteration and adaption are key to improving impact over time. We reinforced a commitment to a culture of learning and curiosity and an appreciation for the role of failure in systems change efforts throughout our work, and established a culture of continual learning and reflection like by conducting simple after-action-reviews, establishing a “Learning in Action” evidence series for all program staff (Box 7), and delivering internal training on what MEL is, how we do it, and why. We also developed a structured **learning agenda** to accompany the EJP strategy—and helped portfolio teams to do the same, prioritizing their own learning interests or needs (Box 8).



## **Box 7: Learning in Action**

We designed the Learning in Action series to introduce relevant new research and evidence to the team and make learning a shared, co-owned responsibility. Every four to eight weeks, in the program's all-staff meetings, we spent 10–15 minutes discussing as a group a selected piece of research that had been identified and summarized by someone in the team. Staff members (including directors) took turns in playing the role of “research teacher,” sharing a summary of their chosen study ahead of the meeting. The summary outlined in no more than two pages the key findings from their chosen study, along with reflections or recommendations on its applicability in the program's work.

We began the series before FGP's merger to form EJP, and with a total staff of 10 people, it was easy to navigate conversations and keep people motivated. In the expanded program, which had a staff size of 40+, the practice didn't work as seamlessly—especially as we moved online during the pandemic in 2020. It was harder to learn as such a large group and some junior staff were less confident presenting to this much bigger audience. We recommend that larger teams consider piloting this practice with smaller groups and/or using break-out groups.

## **Box 8: EJP's learning agenda questions**

Learning agendas are a recognized approach for promoting evidence-based decision making, generating focused and relevant knowledge, and fostering an organizational culture of learning. EJP's learning agenda highlighted 3–5 cross-cutting topics where we thought improved understanding could lead to improved performance and ultimately impact over the life of the strategy.

**Q1:** What role do narratives have in shaping economic policy and practice?

**Q2:** What are the preconditions for a private-sector approach to public responsibilities (public service provision, law enforcement, etc.) to move public authorities to, e.g., crowd-in public investment and/or catalyze public policy change?

**Q3:** How and under what conditions are social movements successful as paths to social impact (e.g., policy change, norm shifts, rebalancing of power)?

**Q4:** What role do financial markets and financial processes play in generating challenges to economic justice objectives like economic equality, transparency, and inclusivity?

One aspect of our ideal MEL system, however, remained frustratingly elusive. We knew that one of the biggest barriers to implementing a successful and robust MEL practice was the absence of a centralized, OSF platform for collecting and managing results and learning data. In an effort to fill this gap, we began to develop a new software solution—the Database for Results & Analysis Management (DREAM). Sadly the promise of this “Dream Platform,” as it became known, was never fully realized. At the time of writing, the software is being piloted; but with the closure of the Economic Justice Program and other major organizational shifts, its scope has been downsized and reframed as a learning project (see Box 9). Meanwhile, the MEL data gap remains.

### **Box 9: Lessons from developing the Dream Platform**

In 2017, we began to talk to senior operational and IT staff about the possibility of designing and piloting a new software solution to collect and manage results and learning data.

It was a complex and political proposition given the size of the Foundations and the importance of its existing central data system, which was built to focus on compliance, financial transactions, and approval chains. Years later, after sign-off from C-level staff and a robust round of vendor selection, our team started to develop the Database for Results & Analysis Management—later known as the “Dream Platform.”

We had to overcome a number of internal challenges relating to security and scale. But perhaps more significantly, we found it especially difficult to describe the systems gap to technical and operational colleagues who had never seen or interacted with MEL data of any kind before; establishing a common understanding of the need and value took time, learning, and flexibility on all sides.

With the closure of the Economic Justice Program and other major organizational shifts, the pilot of the Dream Platform has been downsized and framed as a learning project. Lessons from the pilot will inform the creation of a new integrated system that OSF is now developing to replace its current compliance-focused database. At the time of writing, the new system is set to include some fields for MEL.

Based on our experience, MEL will need to be a core feature of the database design, not just an afterthought. Moreover, for the platform to be useful and usable, it will need to be accompanied by key supporting components—such as clarified and co-owned frameworks, a culture of evidence and learning, and staff who know how to use and apply data. Many of these things will need to be reconfigured in OSF’s newly formed teams.



## Approach 3

### Emphasizing evaluative thinking, not *only* evaluation

#### The status quo

Evaluations, especially those led by donors, come with a lot of baggage: there is the perception that complex change is simply too hard to measure and a long history of ill-suited approaches that do more harm than good—not to mention the understandable fear of admitting failure. It was not surprising, then, that fiscal governance and economic justice field actors were barely doing evaluations of any kind. But without evaluations we (donors and grantees) can't reliably improve what we do to mitigate harms and consequences, nor reliably increase positive impact in the real world. Evaluative thinking is the bridge that helps connect critical thinking skills to evaluation practice, ideally embedding them into an organizational “way of working” that goes beyond discrete evaluation activities. Building capacity for evaluative thinking comes with practice as we examine assumptions, ask critical questions, and use evidence to make decisions.

#### EJP's approach

Given this baggage and our position as a donor, we recognized that to simply demand more evaluations or even champion them among our grantees could easily send mixed signals about our intentions and put organizations on edge. Nor would it be this simple. Instead, we needed to establish or reinforce the idea that evaluative thinking and practice is fundamental to an organization's vision for change; that real commitment to a cause means honestly and methodically interrogating what's working and what's not; that it is not enough to simply claim to “know” or “feel.” In the words of Ruth Levine:



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Yes, we could guess or assume. But guesses and assumptions are for the lazy and the irresponsible, not for the people most dedicated to a just outcome.<sup>10</sup>

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10 Ruth Levine, “The Moral Case for Evidence in Policy-Making,” *Hewlett Foundation*, September 29, 2017, <https://hewlett.org/moral-case-evidence-policymaking>.



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We needed to establish or reinforce the idea that evaluative thinking and practice is fundamental to an organization’s vision for change; that real commitment to a cause means honestly and methodically interrogating what’s working and what’s not; that it is not enough to simply claim to “know” or “feel.”

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We set out to develop this connection between evaluative thinking and the dedication to “a just outcome,” not through a specific set of actions or activities but instead through our values and the ideas we expressed in our everyday interactions with grantees. We rarely required evaluations as part of a grant (despite their notable absence among our grantees), nor did we dictate specific outcomes or indicators—only that the grantee identify their preferred set. Instead, we endeavored to **emphasize our interest in the longer-term organizational strategy and vision** of grantees, rather than focusing narrowly on ours or a specific grant period; to **ask questions** (Box 10), rather than demanding results; and to **offer ideas**, rather than providing answers. This was made all the easier when explicitly reinforced by organization-centered grantmaking practices. We made ourselves available to participate in meetings, working groups, and retreats, and to review and offer feedback on existing or draft strategies, theories of change, MEL workplans, and learning agendas. Demand quickly overwhelmed our small team but confirmed that grantees really valued this type of partnership.

## Box 10: Questions to encourage clarity and rigor

- What do you want to achieve from your work? What does “success” look like?
- What external factors are you relying on in order to get to this success? Or what assumptions have you made or are you making?
- What are the biggest external barriers to this success? And internal ones?
- How will you know that you are making progress towards your goals or objectives? What actions, activities, or milestones might indicate movement in the right direction?
- What harms or unintended consequences might you expect? What about risks? How might you monitor and mitigate these?
- What information or data would you use to know if progress has been made or where to make course corrections? Who has this data and how will you get it?
- How reliable or accurate do you believe these data sources to be, and why? What might this mean for how you interpret it?
- What questions keep you or your leadership up at night?

This shift in emphasis helped us and our grantees to move past some of the traditional power dynamics that come with evaluations and to make our commitment to long-term change and learning explicit from the start. According to evaluations and partner feedback, grantees were better able to see our advice and feedback in the way that it was intended (that is, about the organization’s vision and success, not our own as a donor). And in turn, we were invited into spaces and dialogues that are typically barred to donors, such as board meetings, staff meetings, and discussions about strategy, failure, organizational shortfalls, and even tricky dynamics with other donors. In these spaces, we could gain a much richer understanding of the grantee’s constraints and contribute in a way that nudged towards more robust MEL systems and practices rather than imposing them (see also Approach 4).



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Evaluative thinking allows us to really think about internal management... and think about what you are actually spending the money on and how effective it would be.

**Grantee, I2I interview (2021) for FGP evaluation**

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## Approach 4

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# Understanding grantee needs and tailoring our support

## The status quo

MEL approaches that improve the sustainability and impact of organizations require time, resources, and skills. We believed fully in the benefit of organizations having the internal capacity need to take a committed approach to MEL, but we also knew that grantees faced significant and varying challenges in building it. Systems, funding, and expertise for MEL varied considerably across grantees; in 2016, less than 40 percent had dedicated MEL personnel, 83 percent had never undertaken any evaluations of their work, and none were using any data validation or quality protocols for their internal MEL data. Many had theories of changes that they had been iterating on for several years, while others hadn't even begun this journey.

The time and resources that grantees were putting into MEL often focused on donor requirements and the type of MEL activities that supported short-term, activity-based reporting (rather than learning and long-term change). Given that each donor might have similar but slightly different preferences, this meant that efforts were often duplicated, further crowding out the type of MEL that could support grantees' own mission and growth. Finally, MEL was a dirty word for many in our field, in large part because of less than positive past experiences and the inherent power imbalance between grantees and funders (Approach 1). As such, donor efforts to help grantees build their capacity to undertake effective MEL could all too easily appear threatening, skewing incentives, creating distrust, and making learning less relevant and less likely.

## EJP's approach

We needed to develop a grantee-centered approach that recognized "right-fit" MEL would look different for different organizations depending on the work they do, how they do it, their resources, and many more factors.

We started by **supporting OSF Program Officers**, who knew grantees well and could help to ensure that the idea of improving MEL capacity was being introduced in ways that were supportive, relevant, and non-threatening. Meanwhile, the MEL team invested significant time in understanding grantees' unique challenges, starting points, and goals. We designed a [grantee MEL capacity questionnaire](#) to review seven key ingredients for right-fit MEL (Box 11), the answers to which gave us an **overview of existing practices and gaps within and across grantees**. In order to develop a fuller picture and to begin building trusted working relationships, we initiated **conversations with grantee MEL representatives** (whether full-time MEL officers or other staff with MEL responsibilities).

## Box 11: Seven dimensions of MEL capacity

Right-fit MEL for any organization starts with a set of basic “ingredients,” even if the precise amounts and particular “flavors” will vary. To better understand where our support could make the biggest difference, we looked at grantee capacity across seven of these basic ingredients:

- Theories of change and evidence
- Indicators, data collection, and measurement
- Leadership, culture, and commitment to learning
- MEL roles and responsibilities
- Data and information management
- Evaluations and evaluation practice
- Resources for MEL

Importantly, the questionnaire factored in organizational size and budget to help us understand the collective picture across grantees. Our capacity questionnaire can be downloaded and adapted [here](#).



[FGP’s MEL standard-setting work] is the single most impactful thing that they did. ...Creating the financing stream but also having a core person really made a difference because there was a lot of interaction in teaching and then holding workshops and showing how you do MEL; this is what ‘good’ MEL looks like.

**Funder, I2I interview (2021) for FGP evaluation**

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MEL training was very useful. It allowed us to coordinate with other partners, which was very useful. In our experience, this non-financial support has been respectful with us, well-focused, timely and very useful. That has been a positive experience on our side.

**Grantee, interview with independent consultant (2021)**

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There was no one-size-fits-all solution; we undertook **different combinations of activities, to different degrees, with different organizations**—an approach that the 2021 evaluation of FGP confirmed was effective.

- We offered direct technical assistance, brainstorming and advising on indicators, theories of change, evaluation and right-fit data collection plans, staffing and hiring, among others.
- We advised grantee executive directors and MEL teams on staffing, structure, and systems—and even helped several grantees design new roles and hire talented new people.
- Hosting, facilitating, and promoting events and exchanges (including peer-to-peer learning) for MEL and non-MEL staff within grantee organizations, other funders, and field actors (e.g., researchers, academics) (Box 12; Approach 5).
- Providing direct funding support for organizational health and capacity building (including MEL but also more broadly). See also '[Funding for a healthier civil society](#)'.
- Evidence or tools for the field.
- Engaging in direct donor-to-donor advocacy, appeals, or coordination.

### **Box 12: Managing increased demand for MEL support**

Once the word was out that EJP's MEL team provided useful, hands-on MEL technical advice and coaching, demand quickly outpaced our own internal capacity. It was at this point that peer-to-peer learning and exchanges became especially important (Approach 5) as well as continuing efforts to build capacity and knowhow among Program Officers and analysts.



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It has been useful for us [program officers] to have these points to discuss with grantees, to really see how we can pivot or course-correct and offer support in certain areas ... Not only having sort of the performance indicators as far as deliverables associated with the grant, but having something around organizational health monitoring, evaluation, and learning.

**EJP program officer, interview with independent consultant (2021)**

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## Approach 5

# Seeding peer-led learning among partners

### The status quo

Time and again, we saw that grantees were experiencing—and in some cases, successfully overcoming—many of the same MEL challenges and often had complementary skills and experiences. When discussing MEL with individual grantees, we therefore easily made connections to other organizations who had specific experience with the same challenges. Grantees found this informative and practical: unlike guidance from a donor, the advice that grantees received from their peers was more likely to have been road-tested and would therefore be feasible for another organization to try among competing demands. We were concerned, however, that by acting as a broker, we might inadvertently limit learning or knowledge uptake to a select or preferred group. Moreover, while conversations are great, real knowledge transfer takes time and resources; without a more structured approach in place, the connections made were often one-off conversations that offered little hope for long-term, meaningful evolution in either organization.

### EJP's approach

Rather than continuing to serve as the gatekeeper for grantee relationships, we wanted to put grantees in control by creating spaces in which connections could happen without us. Demand for MEL support was increasing among grantees, and we saw that we could add value by providing the resources, infrastructure, and decision-making autonomy to enable peer-to-peer learning (acting as a thought-partner or matchmaker only when requested).

We held **MEL jamborees**, two-day events<sup>11</sup> that brought together the people tasked with MEL within (most of) our grantee organizations. The jamborees provided grantees with a space in which to talk openly about challenges and to participate in learning sessions on everything from technical evaluation methodologies to budgeting for MEL. Participants worked with an independent facilitator to develop the agendas for the jamborees and largely led the sessions themselves. After the events we wrote and shared reports to capture the issues discussed.



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We had been trying for years to develop a clear plan and strategy for MEL and had not been succeeding. When I went into the MEL Jamboree, I was able to have conversations with people [that put me] in a better position to start shaping what our organization's MEL strategy and principles would look like.

**Grantee, interview with independent consultant (2021)**

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11 We held two MEL jamborees; a third was unable to go ahead due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent dissolution of EJP.

Recognizing that meaningful knowledge transfer is unlikely to happen during a two-day event, we also created a **Learning Exchange Fund**. Grantees could apply to the fund for small, supplementary grants (approximately \$15,000) to support longer, more robust engagement on MEL, research, or theory between two or more EJP grantees. Grantees designed the exchanges themselves, with minimal if any intervention from EJP; unless explicitly requested by the grantees, we did not participate in the design or the exchanges. To ensure that compliance protocols like grant reporting did not get in the way of genuine learning, we asked only for top-line budgets<sup>12</sup> and waived traditional narrative reporting. We requested that grantees instead submit updates or summaries they were already developing (e.g., like an email update to their Executive Director after the learning exchange ended) or be developed into learning for the wider field too (see Box 13).<sup>13</sup>

### **Box 13: Insights from the Learning Exchanges**

One of the small nudges we made was to encourage organizations that participated in Learning Exchanges to share insights and lessons with the wider field. For example,

- the International Budget Partnership published a blog on strategy and learning, which emerged from their Learning Exchange with Oxfam America and Natural Resource Governance Institute
- Open Gov Hub’s report on exchanging ideas and experiences with iCampus in Liberia
- Videos from Accountability Lab’s and ONE Campaign’s Learning Exchange focusing on creating better racial equity policies in development organizations

In interviews with an independent consultant and in the close-out evaluation, grantees reported that Learning Exchanges were one of the most valuable types of support they received from OSF. One grantee noted that the learning exchange “worked so well” because of the relationships that they had built during the MEL jamboree.



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It was really useful to do a deep-dive with the other organizations ... [looking] at the big picture but also the practices and systems and experiences, with all of the informal aspects of MEL.

**Grantee, interview with independent consultant (2021)**

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12 OSF entrusts its grantmaking staff with flexibility and discretion, which we were able to maximize. Our learning brief on organizational health funding explores this concept further.

13 This was the precursor.



## Approach 6

# Funding innovation, evidence, and learning across the economic justice field

## The status quo

Messy problems are hard to measure—and economic (in)justice is certainly a messy problem. Flexible, complexity-centered MEL is possible, but many emerging tools have yet to be well-tailored to the economic justice field—especially when it comes to power shifting, rights, and systems change. Much of the wider economic justice field (including many of EJP’s grantees) had therefore taken the “do nothing” approach when it came to MEL, claiming that measuring social change is simply too hard. In other cases, a lack of familiarity with the full spectrum of MEL approaches has led to rudimentary methods being imposed on complex processes, even when they don’t fit, which often fails to capture the value of work being done (and can even *devalue it*). This creates distrust and further reluctance to engage, which only perpetuates the problem; discouraged, the economic justice field has underinvested in developing and testing resources and tools that are better tailored to its needs. Where investments in MEL are made, they’ve been narrow, like prioritizing shorter-term measurement and infrastructure needs for a particular project or initiative; meanwhile, very few resources have been used to expand the toolkit of approaches relevant to these fields. Without the ability to pursue a different kind of MEL or the knowledge to distinguish between “helpful” and “unhelpful” methods, people remain skeptical, and approaches narrow.

## EJP’s approach

We approached this challenge much as we would any other economic justice theme, using the tools we had at our disposal: grantmaking, technical assistance, and in-kind support. EJP’s Strategy & Impact Unit successfully secured a separate pool of resources for **a standalone portfolio to enhance impact for economic justice** by investing in innovation, evidence, and learning across the field. With an average annual grantmaking budget of \$1.25 million, the Enhancing Impact for Economic Justice portfolio aimed to leave the economic justice field stronger, healthier, and better equipped to do fit-for-purpose research and smarter, more effective MEL than when we started. The portfolio was managed by the S&I Unit, who worked both inside and outside the Open Society Foundations to achieve three goals:

1. Advance a more cohesive discourse and vision around economic justice within the Open Society Foundations and more broadly in the field.
2. Strengthen evidence and practice for pathways to change in economic justice.
3. Augment the organizational health and resilience of EJP grantees.

In practice, this work took several forms. Through the portfolio, we provided grantees with financial and technical support **to test or explore new MEL practices and share these with the field** (Box 14). One approach that was particularly successful was to identify organizations that already had a mandate to advance field-wide evidence and learning and to invest in their work (Box 15).

#### **Box 14: Supporting the use of new, complex-sensitive methods (2018–19)**

We provided financial and technical support to our partner Accountability Lab to evaluate the contribution of Liberian public officials to changes in rules, practices, or services that better served the Liberian public. Accountability Lab had identified these officials in its Integrity Icon campaign. EJP's support helped Accountability Lab to evaluate their work using contribution tracing—a new complexity-sensitive impact evaluation method—and to develop resources, experience, and evidence to enable other partners to use this MEL tool in their own work. Since 2019, several partners in the field have employed contribution tracing methods, including in the Open Government Partnership's recent external evaluation supported by OSF, Hewlett Foundation, and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

We partnered with others to **identify and address common challenges**, creating tools and resources for grantees and the wider field in response to the barriers they had told us they were facing in relation to evidence and learning. For example, we repeatedly saw grantees struggling to measure outcomes in the space between organizational activities and high-level impacts (the “missing middle”). Working with Results for Development, we developed a **searchable repository of existing indicators** for fiscal governance outcomes and new easy-to-use, adaptable toolkits that organizations could use to assess the strength of the civil society ecosystem; outcomes from communications and advocacy campaigns; and government capacity, incentives, relationships, and influence. You can find a brief introduction to the project here. In fact, one of the final grants EJP made was to Results for Development to continue the next phase of this work through 2023, in the hope that other funders and field actors would take up the work from there.



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There's just an ability to really co-create with EJP-OSF partners [grantees] when it comes to evaluation learning, and to see them use that evaluation learning in a very applied and actionable way that I think you sometimes don't see with other grantees and other CSOs and organizations that are supported by other donors.

**Funder, I2I interview (2021) for FGP evaluation**

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### Box 15: Core support to centers of evidence and learning

One of our grantees was the Accountability Research Center (ARC), which had been newly created in 2017. ARC's "ways of working" included resetting approaches to research and learning and putting practitioners and policymakers (especially those from the Global South) at the center of research design, translation, and implementation. Along with suggestions to prioritize communications and outreach, EJP provided ARC with an annual average of \$150,000 in core support between 2017 and 2022. Over this period ARC released or co-published 55 publications, 39 of them written or co-written by authors from the Global South. ARC has made a number of these publications available in two or more languages (including Bahasa Indonesia, Bisayan, Filipino, Hindi, Portuguese, Spanish, and, soon, Arabic), and its [Accountability Keywords Project](#) explicitly focuses on how the meaning of the terms we use to talk about accountability differs between contexts and languages. Of ARC's 19 active partnerships, 14 are led by organizations or individuals in the Global South.



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The support that [FGP/EJP] provide to learning and evaluation is huge... it has ripple effects on the field; I think it changes what other donors are doing.

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Funder, I2I interview (2021) for FGP evaluation

**In late 2018, the Open Society Foundations made a bold new commitment to fighting economic injustice.**

Through a merger of OSF's existing Fiscal Governance and Economic Advancement Programs, the Economic Justice Program (EJP) was formed and tasked with designing the Foundations' first-ever global economic justice strategy.

Due to changes in OSF leadership, the decision was made in late 2021 to centralize the Foundations' cross-cutting global work, which meant the closure of individual thematic programs including EJP. It is understood that key elements of EJP's designed strategy will be taken forward by a new central unit. Final decisions are likely to be confirmed by early 2023.