CASE STUDY:

LEARNING FROM FAILURE TO ACCELERATE SUCCESS IN RESILIENCE-BUILDING INITIATIVES

Global Resilience Partnership
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GLOBAL RESILIENCE PARTNERSHIP

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Images

Front cover: Lutheran World Relief by S. Verkaart; back cover: Mercy Corps

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Global Resilience Partnership (GRP) is a partnership of public and private organizations joining forces towards a resilient, sustainable and prosperous future for vulnerable people and places.

The aim of this report is to share learning and insights from GRP's experience of working with its Challenge Funds to drive innovation in resilience practice, by creating a safe space for grantees to test, learn and adapt their projects. It is aimed at those interested in learning about how to create a space to test innovations, take risks and embrace and learn from failure.

This report explores case studies based on project documentation[1] and interviews with GRP Challenge projects and GRP secretariat members. It is intended to be reflective in nature. It is not an evaluation of the grantees discussed.

Failure for GRP is not viewed negatively. Instead, it represents a great opportunity to learn from and improve the project and, crucially, to document and share that learning so others avoid the same mistakes. This focus on learning has permeated the entire GRP 'ecosystem', from the donors through to the Fund Manager, Secretariat, learning partners and grantees.

Key lessons:

Creating a culture of openness to learning: Fear of being penalized for being perceived to fail, or projects not meeting the original stated aims, is a great barrier to learning.

Relationships and trust are critical: GRP invested significantly in working closely with grantees from the outset to establish a culture of learning. At kick-off and close-out meetings, it was made clear that GRP wanted not only to generate results in terms of resilience, but also learn what works and what does not in a rapid cycle of 18 months.

Selecting appropriate modalities: The type of modality is important when considering whether a culture of learning from failure may easily be established. Challenge Funds and Innovation Prizes tend to be smaller investments (particularly for innovation prizes) across a portfolio of projects, often with the aim of surfacing new solutions or imitating or adapting existing ones. This distributes risk across a larger number of potentially successful projects rather than trying to 'back a winner'. This means that the appetite for risk of failure is often higher among donors or investors and therefore gives reassurance to grantees that a certain degree of failure is tolerable, as long as there is a system in place to adapt projects and programs in a timely way and ensure any learning is shared.

Rigidity versus flexibility of targets – balancing accountability and learning: There is a need to balance flexibility (to allow a focus on learning) with rigidity (to ensure there is a degree of accountability), particularly for public funds. This is often managed by agreeing a tolerable degree of failure and use of funding in advance.

[1] GRP grantee Final Reports, Quarterly Reports and Site Visit Reports

Focus on the 'L' in MEL: Once a culture of openness and trust has been built and an appropriate modality selected, there is a need for a systematic way of generating and collecting evidence and learning on what hasn't worked and, critically, why. Designing a MEL system to support this intentionally is critical. This requires an understanding of the information needs of those who will use the learning.

Being mindful of unintended consequences: If stated outcomes are achieved but there are deleterious effects elsewhere, how should the tradeoffs be handled? While GRP's appetite for risk of project failure was perhaps higher than in other programs, there was an acknowledgment that within a development context there is arguably a greater responsibility to adopt a 'do no harm' principle.

Recommendations:

Learn (quickly) from failure: This means projects should have learning and flexibility built into their designs, encourage a degree of experimentation and risk-taking (while adhering to the principle of 'do no harm') and use monitoring and evaluation as a feedback system that fuels real-time learning – especially learning from failure.

Consider the risks or implications of ignoring failure: It is important to ask what the implications are of not being open to learning from failure and sharing what has changed as a result. This may mean projects become stuck in an eternal cycle of pilots that do not work, with commensurate investment potentially wasted.

Projects must design in a culture of learning from the start and find tools and mechanisms to respond: To define appropriate resilience-building solutions, projects need to 'probe-sense-respond' in such a way that evidence, knowledge and practice are emergent. Interventions will need to be refined and enhanced following improved understanding of what works.

Work closely with the projects in a structured way: A close relationship helps in identifying and understanding any weaknesses and emerging opportunities, and to spot any failure early on.

Identify failure thresholds and convey expectations clearly: Establishing the rules of the game from the outset is critical. This includes individual discussions about the thresholds or limits of failure and how learning will be identified and shared.

Consider phasing to allow testing at the right time: It is important to identify a period or cycle during which testing and innovating is most intense, in between periods of implementing before reflecting and reviewing. These may be pre-determined – for example three-month 'sprint' cycles – or they may be more *ad hoc*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

The Global Resilience Partnership (GRP) is a partnership of public and private organizations joining forces towards a resilient, sustainable and prosperous future for vulnerable people and places. GRP believes that resilience underpins sustainable development in an increasingly unpredictable world. We envision a world where vulnerable people and places are able to thrive in the face of surprise, uncertainty and change. Recognizing that complex and intractable issues require innovative and tailored solutions, GRP works in cycles of innovating, testing and adapting. GRP empowers local actors to lead problem identification and solution development, seeking to test and scale disruptive ideas that are 'off the beaten track' and daring in premise.

GRP defines innovation as a prerequisite to transformative action – something that adds practical, sustainable, resilient value at scale. Innovation is an adaptive and iterative process that should dare to take risks and be ready to fail fast and fail smart. Equally important is taking the first step – starting the innovation journey even when not on the perfect pathway. More specifically, it is the process of translating this idea or invention into a product or service that creates or adds value. To qualify as a viable innovation, it must be scalable or replicable at an economical cost and must address a well-defined problem and satisfy a well-understood need.

GRP Challenge Funds and Innovation Challenge

GRP aims to source and develop novel solutions to creating resilience, increasing motivation and ambition for building resilience and contributing to the associated knowledge base. As part of this ambition, GRP has run three Challenges and invested over $35 million in resilience programming in the Sahel, Horn of Africa and South and Southeast Asia.

The first two Challenges resulted in 10 projects being funded in the Global Resilience Challenge and 12 projects being funded in the Water Window. Through an Innovation Challenge launched in 2019, GRP selected 16 projects to receive in-kind mentoring support. In total, the Challenges benefited nearly 7 million people, supported over 1,100 organizations and received numerous awards. This report discusses seven of these projects in more detail.

These investments have been complemented and amplified through an extensive program of monitoring, evaluation and learning; scaling and incubation; policy; and communications support. Innovation and scaling are closely linked to GRP knowledge-brokering activities to draw out key lessons from GRP Challenges. A summary of the lessons learned from these investments was put forward in GRP's Resilience Insights report, launched in September 2019.

The GRP Incubator

GRP has established an Incubator, whose role is to contribute to GRP's vision for resilience by surfacing and identifying new and effective resilience solutions and supporting them through mentoring, learning from failure and leadership development. This equips GRP to be better at planning, implementing and following through on its

initiatives, building resilience not only in the community but also at organization and sector level.

The Incubator is hands-on and works independently from Grants and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL), in the sense that it strives to be a safe partner for the projects, and one with which the partners feel free to share problems and challenges. The Incubator depends on the development of a high level of trust with the project so it is an enabler of project success. For that to happen, it is necessary to investigate the strengths and successes, but also the weaknesses and failures. This is done through diving deep via a *Value Chain-Driven Viability Analysis* and a *Resilience and Scaling Assessment* that identifies strengths and weak points.

The Incubator still works in close collaboration with MEL around learning and designing future challenges and initiatives, and is the main point of contact for the projects over the full implementation period. The Incubator comprises a small team, with access to experts from various fields and sectors to support its work.

Focus of this report

Purpose and audience

The aim of this report is to share learning and insights from GRP's experience of working with its Challenge Funds to drive innovation in resilience practice, by creating a safe space for grantees to test, learn and adapt their projects. It is aimed at those interested in learning about how to create an environment or culture in which failure is accepted, as long as the experience is used to learn and improve. This may include those involved in planning investment in resilience programs, designing challenge funds, designing for adaptation or learning more generally.

Scope

This report explores case studies based on project documentation[2] and interviews with GRP Challenge projects and GRP secretariat members. It is intended to be reflective in nature. It is not an evaluation of the grantees discussed. The selection of particular projects does not reflect any determination that they have failed as projects; indeed, the GRP Challenge projects have largely been successful. However, some projects have inevitably faced unique internal or external challenges along the way, and aspects of their work have not been as successful as intended. Where this has been the case, some of these projects have been more open and reflected not only on the things that did not work, but also what that taught them and the changes made as a result. It is these projects and their learning that form the basis of this report.

Focus

We are interested in shining a light on aspects of a project that have not worked as expected, the reasons for this, and what has changed as a result. Where possible, we provide an update on each of the projects discussed in terms of their progress and status. Our focus is essentially on answering some key questions:

1. What are the examples of learning from failure among GRP grantees?
2. What are some of the key principles of learning from failure?

[2] GRP grantee Final Reports, Quarterly Reports and Site Visit Reports

3. How to enable learning from failure in the future?

Structure

The report is organized into the following sections: Section 2 sets out why GRP thinks a focus on learning from failure is important, including what it means by learning from failure, and how learning from failure has been supported. Section 3 provides a brief summary of the wider literature on this subject. Section 4 offers a set of case studies based on GRP grantee evidence and learning. Section 5 synthesizes the lessons and challenges presented in the preceding sections. Section 6 offers some recommendations to help build a learning from failure culture into programs designed to drive innovation.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING FROM FAILURE

Why are we focusing on this subject?

Most development projects – where most resilience work currently takes place – have short to medium timeframes. During this period, the system, project or community may be subject to change. It is therefore vital to regularly revisit the information available, exploring what has worked, what has not worked and why and what this means for current and future work. Moreover, effective solutions will not be found unless we are willing to try new things. This entrepreneurial mindset is often missing from aid and development spending but has to be integral to any resilience program. Initiatives may not work out as planned when implemented, and this is fine as long as we use learning from failure to improve projects and ideas. Reflecting on GRP's experience contributes to resilience knowledge and iterative learning to find solutions that bring positive transformation.

What does GRP mean by failure?

Before considering what GRP means by failure, it is worth briefly reflecting on what it means by success. GRP is working long term and at scale to bring about resilient change for the world's most vulnerable people. GRP is designed to spark innovation chains, incubate and bring to scale solutions that help meet this challenge. In this way, it does not narrowly define results in terms of outputs or outcomes in a project cycle. Instead, it looks to build lasting effect on the ground with replicable and scalable solutions while building the long-term capacity of organizations and individuals. This also includes recommending and supporting policy change towards its aims.

Failure for GRP is not viewed negatively or as an opportunity to penalize projects. Instead, it represents a great opportunity to learn from and improve the project (or aspects of it) and, crucially, to document and share that learning so others avoid the same mistakes. This focus on learning has permeated the entire GRP 'ecosystem', from the donors through to the Fund Manager, Secretariat, learning partners and grantees. Creating this space to test innovations, take risks and embrace and learn from failure is important.

3. LEARNING FROM FAILURE IN THE LITERATURE

Literature search

In the course of producing this case study, the team conducted a rapid scan of the literature related to failure, in the context of international development broadly and also specifically from challenge funds (where available). We anticipated finding very little in the literature that systematically describes learning from failure. This is because of the classic 'file drawer problem'[3] – a form of bias that means anything that has not worked as planned or failed outright is seldom discussed and certainly not published. This means there is an overrepresentation in the literature of perceived successful projects with little insight on how they succeeded and what they did when they inevitably encountered a problem. This significantly reduces the opportunity to learn and avoid the same mistakes. In short, and as anticipated, we found no comprehensive literature on failure. Details of the search terms, sources and number of reviewed articles are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview of the search strategy and returns

Search terms	Sources	# Reviewed articles
challenge fund, failure, learning, learning from failure, failing fast, innovation prize, development challenge, adaptation, innovation	Google (both general and advanced searches) Google Scholar Science Direct Rockefeller Foundation Dev Tracker	32 fully reviewed articles

Evidence from the literature

The review indicates there is no coherent body of literature on failure and learning from failure for development outcomes. However, there is some literature addressing failure in businesses more generally, including research briefs such as '339 Start-Up Failure Post-Mortems', which collates data on why start-ups have failed.[4] Reasons range from liquidity issues to the absence of a market, or the business model not being viable. Although this article is useful to learn from other businesses' failures, it only collates the data and does not analyze or draw any easily accessible high-level conclusions or lessons.

A group of online writers and bloggers on the subject have argued that there is a need for more coherent literature on failure, so lessons learned are used when designing future projects.[5] This may be done by talking about failure and sharing experiences in an open and honest way. Relationships are key to this, and honest enquiry encourages an environment where both failures and successes are discussed.[6] This is already happening to some extent, and examples have been seen, such as the conference held by Triple Line Consulting and Bath University in 2015, which discussed failure, or indeed the 'Failure Fest' session organized with GRP grantees. At a program level, failure has been shared in an open and honest way in workshops, some of which are published, such as the RIU Tanzania 2011 'write shop'.[7] However,

[3] Nagarajan et al. (2017)
[4] https://www.cbinsights.com/research/startup-failure-post-mortem/ [accessed 7 February 2020]
[5] Catalanoa et al. (2019), Kessler (2013), Brown (2020), Vowles (2016)
[6] Kessler (2013)
[7] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08aec40f0b652dd0009a8/riu11tz-lessons-complete.pdf

the write-ups (much like the article on start-up failure), remain open to interpretation by the reader as they draw no conclusions or learnings.

The potential for learning from failure in challenge funds is said to be both huge and unexploited.[8] However, failure is hard to identify in documentation for challenge funds, perhaps because targets and boundaries are often moved to accommodate new needs.[9] The literature is divided on this subject and some people believe targets should be flexible, as having inflexible targets could lead to the erroneous conclusion of failure in a fund.[10] Others stress the need to report against pre-agreed targets.[11]

Program documentation generally focuses on success and does not report failure in a clear way, making it hard to find examples of failure online. Results-based payments may contribute to this by incentivizing reporting on success, and opportunities to learn from failure are then missed.[12] Most programs do report on their learnings, but it is not always clear whether they have learned through failing first.

While learning from failure is important, there are few examples of this being done in a systematic, integrated way. A better vocabulary is required to discuss and present success, failure and learning. Overall, there is no coherent literature drawing high-level conclusions on collated instances of failure. Failure reporting is rare; when failure is reported, it lacks structure and standardization. There is general agreement that failure needs to be addressed and presented so that there is an opportunity to learn from it. Some organizations are starting to make movements towards talking about failure, but this has yet to translate into easily accessible literature on the subject.

4. WHAT WE LEARNED FROM GRP's EXPERIENCE

In this section we provide examples from the GRP Challenge portfolio, which provide valuable lessons on how they learned from aspects of their projects that did not work as planned, and critically, what changes they made as a result. These insights are derived from a combination of project documentation (where grantees shared or reported learning as prompted by the MEL guidance) and interviews with some of the grantees. **Their inclusion here as examples in no way indicates that the projects were a failure;** in fact, many of them have gone on to progress through the GRP Incubator and are, in many cases, scaling up the successful aspects of their projects.

4.1 Mercy Corps TRADER

Background

Mercy Corps' Taking Risk out of Agricultural Trade for Relief and Development Enhanced with Resilience (TRADER) designed an innovative *sharia*-compliant financial product to support improved market functions within the livestock system in Wajir, Kenya. In partnership with Crescent Takaful Sacco (CTS), livestock traders, pastoral communities, meat exporters, county government officials, Islamic scholars, and other key stakeholders, Mercy Corps unlocked a solution for building livestock-keeping

[8] IPE and University of Bath (2015)
[9] Vowles (2016)
[10] Falk (2019)
[11] Pompa (2013)
[12] O'Riordan (2014)

households' resilience to climate extremes. The financial product Mifugo Kash Kash (MKK), literally translated as "cashing livestock", leverages pastoralists' innate resourcefulness and entrepreneurialism by affording reliable and consistent access to working capital and a secured and consistent end market for their livestock. The project helped livestock owners manage their assets and livelihood risks while simultaneously increasing their household-level productivity and wealth. Given the limited timescale of TRADER, the project team stated that it would be 'irresponsible to claim that the project built resilience'. However, important learning has been generated as close monitoring made it possible to recognize that the initial pilot approach was not working.

Challenges

Adaptive project management allowed the MKK pilot to be safely tested, stopped when problems were recognized and redesigned to better meet local needs. *'During the first three trade cycles, less than half of the 13 livestock trader groups involved made profit on the trade, and CTS lost money. Mercy Corps could not in good conscience advise CTS to proceed with the original six-cycle pilot plan. Instead, we agreed with CTS to press pause on the pilot. We reviewed evidence and learning, consulted with the traders and Islamic finance experts, and reconvened equipped to iterate our approach.'*

Effective monitoring, flexible management and careful risk calculation allowed for effective and thorough testing of MKK. '*Mercy Corps was able to test MKK safely and productively during the pilot of MKK Mudharaba – surfacing learning to refine the product without detriment to the well-being of the target population. We attribute this success to our shock-responsive monitoring systems that quickly alerted us to potential issues, combined with a flexible and responsive management system that allowed us to pivot quickly and nimbly in response*.'

Learning

Mercy Corps was able to work flexibly with different funders and partner organizations to find a cost-effective way to design and pilot a value chain financing product. A participatory approach to project design helped break down barriers within the consortium, and enabled beneficiaries to input into decisions affecting their resilience. As a result of the field-testing and adaptation, a new product was developed and transferred. Even though the initial pilot proved unsuccessful, the project gave small traders who had previously sold in local markets access to export markets and, through livestock sales, benefited 2,000 households in Wajir county, Kenya. Project partner and Islamic finance provider CTS disbursed $124,940 in loans.

4.2 One Architecture

Background

One Architecture & Urbanism is collaborating with its partners, the Philippine Reclamation Authority (PRA), the Asian Institute of Management and Wetlands International as 'One Resilient Team' to combat flood risk in the Philippines through mangrove planting and beach restoration for effective coastal protection against storm surges and flooding. The project began in 2017 and takes place in Tacloban City, which was devastated by Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, and is implemented and led by local government partners in close coordination with community leaders. Local

empowerment supports inclusive decision-making and ensures the perspectives of vulnerable communities are considered.

Challenges

Wetlands International recently reported that, although mangrove planting is hugely popular, many efforts fail to establish sizable, diverse, functional and self-sustaining mangrove forests, owing to weak or no involvement of the community, mono-species planting and poor choice of location. In the Philippines, mangrove-replanting efforts are particularly extensive and have received millions of dollars since Haiyan. Activities have focused on replanting existing mangroves on the seafront; this is seldom successful because, although mangroves are popular, easy to propagate and plant, planting takes place in water that is too deep or the species used are not typhoon-resistant. This is a dark side of mangrove restoration and rehabilitation that is rarely talked about as money is wasted on non-sustainable, non-typhoon-resistant mangrove-replanting efforts.

By contrast, the One Architecture team actively engages in a process of science-driven mangrove and beach forest restoration pilots to fill persistent gaps in Tacloban's green infrastructure. The project aims to resolve government relations in coastal protection by documenting common challenges; unique conditions and procedures; and gaps in processes. The local government works together with civil society and academics who support the proper planting of mangroves, leading to sustained results. They also aim to restore abandoned fish ponds by replanting mangroves. The reversion of fish ponds is controversial because of its tenurial aspects, with tenure held either by private actors or a variety of government agencies with various, sometimes overlapping, mandates. However, reversion is needed to fill the gaps in the coastal greenbelt.

The One Resilient Team has gained several insights from the implementation of three pilot project interventions. The pilot sites have been monitored for ecological success but also to assess economic, social and governance factors in individual project design, implementation and maintenance. Because the One Resilient Team worked with complicated pilots, part of the intervention could not be completed within the project period. Yet the main success of the project has been in identifying the barriers in local governance that have hampered restoration efforts – such as jurisdictional conflicts, other agencies undertaking poor replanting measures and tenurial issues in securing sites.

Learning

The main aim of the project was to learn from implementing complex pilots, documenting challenges (and opportunities), to enable scaling and wider implementation, with a structured approach to learning from failure (and success). One Architecture and its partners (the One Resilient Team) carefully documented challenges and lessons learned from their efforts to improve mangrove planting and coastal protection strategies moving forward. Through this systematized learning process, local partner capacity may be improved to better implement green belt restoration in Tacloban and beyond. This shows the importance of flexibility and willingness to adapt as opportunities arise, which is combined with the practice of cataloguing complications and unanticipated challenges. This is particularly crucial in the unpredictable and complicated climatic context of Tacloban City.

4.3 Mahila Housing Trust

Background

Mahila Housing Trust (MHT) devised local coping mechanisms and adaptation technologies to build the climate resilience capacities of the urban poor in seven South Asian cities. MHT empowers women from slums to take action against the most pressing climate-related risks facing their communities: heatwaves, flooding, water scarcity and water- and vector-borne diseases. Utilizing a network of woman advocates, it could empower these communities to influence city planning so that their cities adopt adaptation and resilience actions that reflect a pro-poor agenda.

The multi-layered intervention delivered by a consortium of diverse partners encouraged mutual learning and opened ways for the poor to raise their voice to government. This was a project that was funded to scale, and transferability of its model enabled replication in cities across India. Participation in policy events increased recognition of the work in South Asia. Current scaling activities focus on the development of a social enterprise. MHT is a Sasakawa Award winner, recognizing its contribution to ensuring inclusive, accessible and non-discriminatory participation in disaster risk reduction activities for all sections of society, especially the poor.

Challenges

Overall, it was found that the project had underestimated the difficulty of training women with very low levels of education and literacy. Project staff also found that communities were not familiar with the concept of resilience, which was not easily translated or described. This threatened to hinder progress. In response to this, the team worked with communities to develop a symbol of resilience with community leaders, creating a symbol that made it easier to introduce the concept to wider communities. Establishing trusted relationships took time, and this is something that MHT felt it needed to do more of. It also points to the need for more time to get an approach institutionalized, and to work on joint planning.

As this was a big project for the organization, it went through a steep learning curve. However, Bijal Brahmbhatt, MHT's director, indicated that GRP had helped MHT grow as an organization. On the ground, field-level help has been really valued – with Challenge Manager and Secretariat staff coming to talk to the team and help clarify what is needed and what could work best. In addition, it was appreciated that changes in the budget were allowed to adapt to unexpected circumstances: this flexibility allows MHT to focus on successful elements to reach maximum effects. For example, MHT decided to focus scaling phase activities on Indian cities, as expanding its model to Nepal and Bangladesh during the main implementation phase had proved to be challenging. The whole concept of resilience has been embraced throughout the organization, and now institutionalized. Communication and monitoring and evaluation systems have been improved and will enable the further scaling of the organization.

Learning

One of the key learnings emerging from this project is the importance of ensuring sufficient time and focus is given to stakeholder engagement, trust-building and collaboration. Planned approaches to training had to be adapted in the face of this

learning, and demonstration was favored over direct teaching. In the same way, the team also discovered the importance of 'quick wins' – finding ways to address communities' short-term issues while working on longer-term objectives. This helped engage communities and supported training efforts. Likewise, such quick wins helped engage wider stakeholders such as municipal governments, which could see evidence of the positive outcomes of work being done. Community-led data collection also assisted in this, producing evidence that could be used to engage communities and municipal governments.

4.4 Groundswell International

Background

This project has engaged in building the resilience of communities in the Sahel's ecologically fragile dry lands, giving particular attention to women and the most vulnerable households. The team helped small-scale farmers experiment with agro-ecological innovations to increase climate-resilient food production and dietary diversity in their communities, while also regenerating soils, trees and vegetative cover. By enhancing women's access to credit, land and water, the team aimed to empower female farmers in the process. These efforts built on intensive 'farmer-to-farmer' learning and exchange between communities, linking up with district government development programs and fostering more effective policies and programs to build resilience.

Large-scale and inclusive stakeholder engagement, combined with a participatory approach, created buy-in and contributed to sustained adoption of agro-ecological practices, with beneficiaries investing in agro-ecology practices themselves. Partner buy-in played a crucial role in identifying opportunities to replicate Groundswell's innovations (and share lessons learned), and demonstration days enabled village leaders and farmers to engage directly with policy-makers, also generating widespread media coverage.

Challenges

The project was provided with support to scale, and, while it was successful in some ways, the team identified that it had not achieved all it had set out to do. Particular difficulties were faced by Groundswell relating to the complexity of working with multiple stakeholders to deliver on policy and advocacy work, specifically in the scaling part of the project. Some important external factors influenced this, such as political unrest in the region, lead staff being unavailable within the timeframe and delays to funding. However, the team also felt that the plan might have been too ambitious, which meant not only that it could not be achieved but also that more time was needed to develop the plan into a clear approach to implementation.

Learning

Groundswell learned about the importance of clear communication methods in policy and advocacy work. Support from GRP helped it refine communication methods to improve uptake and efficiency. It also recognized the need to build on existing networks, as the task is too great for the voice of one small organization. However, by working with wider networks, it overcame some of the problems it faced around influencing policy. It also found that it faced barriers owing to limited capacity and capability of stakeholders who were key to their policy and advocacy work. Key

learning here concerned ensuring there was an in-depth understanding of different stakeholders and their capacity, during planning for such a project. In general, it was felt that the timeframe was too short to implement successful policy and systems change work.

4.5 Producers Direct

Background

Producers Direct is owned and led by smallholder farmers. It pioneers a new model centered on smallholder leadership and development of innovative solutions that transform farms into sustainable businesses.

This project addressed inefficient and fragmented value chains by utilizing technology to provide necessary data, tools and information to improve livelihoods, promote value chain inclusion and build resilience for smallholders. The project aimed to ensure empowered smallholder households had access to systems, tools, data and information that increase value chain efficiency and inclusion; expand their market opportunities, economic growth and poverty reduction; and ensure financial inclusion, especially for women and youth. Mobile tools are now being used to support resilience in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, and the mechanism for delivery (using youth workers) has affected intergenerational relationships.

Challenges

The project identified how farmers used, or did not use, the mobile tools 2Kuze and Wefarm, as well as testing the digitization of on-farm record keeping approaches. As part of the project, Youth Leaders, who were supporting the spread of the mobile tools, were able to identify a range of barriers to consistent use. 2Kuze – designed to support farmers to aggregate and collectively sell surplus produce to local markets, for example, faced multiple problems in representing a reliable usable platform for farmers. Based on this initial experience, Producers Direct further invested in piloting and developing in-person services, led by youth leaders, to be used in combination with the digital app, to facilitate local sale of a range of food crops, including honey, fruits and vegetables. In addition, an external evaluation identified that the success of the record keeping app was limited during the project lifetime. Farmers appeared to prefer using their own original paper-based logbooks. Identifying the financial incentive with regard to the youth work was very important and took longer than expected, as did identifying the best business model to scale activities beyond the project lifetime into a sustainable enterprise.

Learning

The project brought to light the importance of identifying what in-person support systems are needed to work alongside digital technology and encourage use. Training for the users of project tools and human-centered design enabled Producers Direct to solve technical challenges, empower the users and maximize benefits. Moreover, partner engagement in strategic planning secured partner buy-in and investment for project scale-up. The project involved many forms of participation, with stakeholders involved in an iterative process to develop products and approaches used. It was recognized that, despite extensive research to ensure user suitability, there is still the need for a human interactive element to support the use of apps and digital products

once in the field. In addition, timeframes beyond the project lifetime are required to support adoption by smallholders who are not accustomed to using technologies to support on-farm management and product training.

4.6 IFPRI SATISFy

Background

The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) provides research-based policy solutions to sustainably reduce poverty and end hunger and malnutrition by increasing food security in developing countries. The project received funding to address the challenge presented by uninsured risks, which is a major cause of low agricultural productivity in the Horn of Africa.

The project proposed a market-based innovative risk management solution in the form of Risk-Contingent Credit (RCC), a social safety net that could mitigate drought risks for the rural poor and improve farm productivity and livelihood. RCC seeks to address the challenge that lenders are reluctant to lend to farmers because of the financial risks associated with crop failure or radical decreases in market prices. Because RCC targets downside business risk, it simultaneously reduces financial risk and exposure. This risk-balancing effect encouraged increased supply of and access to credit, and also encouraged risk-rationed farmers to increase the use of credit.

Challenges

The design of RCC was put to the test when a combination of early season floods and longer-term drought in Machakos county led to a failed harvest and farmers needing the insurance component. However, because of the floods, total rainfall was above the threshold and the insurance was not triggered. In response, the project (not insurance) compensated affected farmers. This clearly showed the need to modify RCC so that insurance triggers would pay out when harvests failed in cases of poorly distributed rains.

As a result, RCC was redesigned to take into account rainfall patterns as they unfold. Remote-sensing satellite technology is used to track rainfall, and, if the average drops below a set threshold in any 21-day period during the growing season, it triggers pay-outs that cover farmers' loans. With this new scheme, even when the rainfall is below average for a certain period, the insurance pay-out will be triggered, and farmers will be protected against losses. The project thereby created a first-of-its-kind credit scheme of second-generation contingent credit, to cushion smallholder farmers in Kenya's dryland areas from frequent droughts.

The success of this project further centered around ensuring truly inclusive decision-making, with farmers and banks, to ensure that a product is produced that all sides will use. Some developed models met the needs of one party more than the other, which did not work, and the project found that, to meet the needs of all parties, it had to find a mechanism that is relatively cheap but also reliable. It also found complexities in seeking to scale when facing other market players in new areas, and recognized the need to consider the market in more detail when planning for scale.

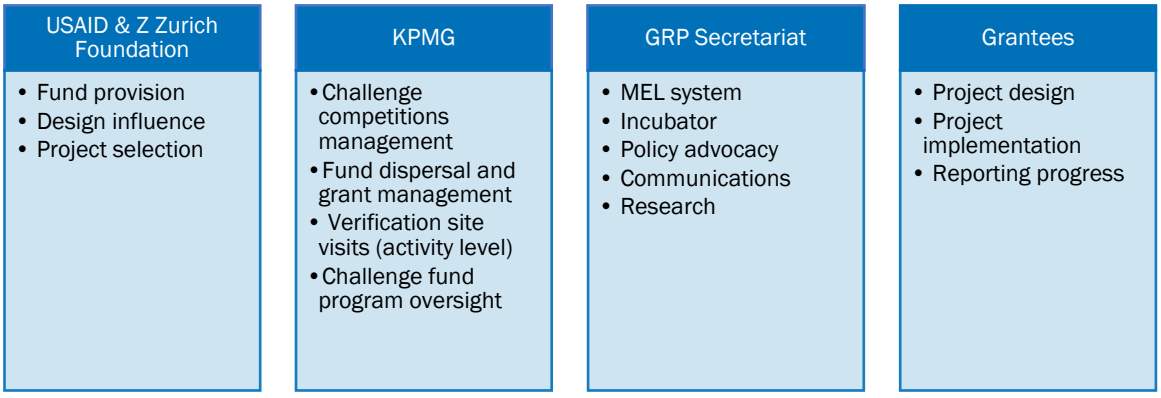
Learning

IFPRI learned and developed from its first trial, created a new product that works better and subsequently received continued support from key financial institutions Equity and KCB, which are using it in other parts of Kenya. There are also plans to shift the trial to show how it may be used with other products than maize. There was recognition of a conflict of interest with for-profit partners, who may be focused on the best deal for them and not for the farmers. The need for strong public–private partnerships is very important, and the project faced some difficulties building up trusted relationships with banks. However, it recognized the need to spend time building up these trusted relationships and overcame this challenge.

5. LESSONS FROM GRP

GRP was intentional about ensuring learning from failure was built into its design and implementation from the outset. Below are a set of characteristics of the GRP 'ecosystem' to support this learning culture, identified as a result of this learning review. It is important to note how the GRP program has been structured, which has also enabled it to maximize the opportunity to learn from failure - see Figure 1.

Figure 1: The main actors in the GRP challenge fund 'ecosystem' and their functions[13]



Learning through innovation: As we have seen from the individual cases, the Challenge rounds enabled stakeholders to learn through testing approaches and innovations, and grantees appreciated the concept development and mentoring built into the process, which encouraged them to think through their innovations. Grantees were attracted by the focus on innovation, language around learning from failure and the possibility of flexibility. Grantees also highly benefited from opportunities to convene and learn from one another and from the support from the Incubator, the MEL team and the Grants Management team.

Creating a culture of openness to learning: Fear of being penalized for being perceived to fail, or projects not meeting the original stated aims, is a great barrier to learning. Creating a culture of openness among grantees (in the case of GRP – this could be other implementing entities or the actor who is 'doing the doing') is essential if insightful information on what is not working is to be shared. This may be achieved in a number of ways (see next points).

[13] Rockefeller Foundation provided core funding to set up the Global Resilience Challenge, but did not directly fund projects.

Relationships and trust are critical: GRP invested significantly in working closely with grantees from the outset to establish a culture of learning. At kick-off and close-out meetings, it was made clear that GRP wanted not only to generate results in terms of resilience, but also learn from what works and what does not in a rapid cycle of 18 months. The GRP Secretariat, through MEL and the Incubator, was able to position itself as a critical friend to the grantees. This was also particularly evident in the Incubator's leadership academy, which provided a 'safe space' to share learning among grantees, tailored to their skills and creating a 'team' atmosphere.

Box 1: Summary of insights from the GRP Failure Fest Workshop, Nepal 2018

A crucial part of GRP's strategy is being open to failure and encouraging learning from this, rather than repeating the same mistakes. For example, during the grantee close-out workshops, GRP organized a special 'failure fest', at which grantees are asked to share what did not work in building resilience, in the awareness that not acknowledging failure is a sign itself of not having a resilient model to start with. This required a safe space, repeated encouragement and a true interest in hearing about and celebrating failures. In this session, donors express their interest in learning from failure. This has helped create trust for honest reflection. A blog with exciting reflections on this session was written by ISET, one of the Water Window grantees,[14] surfacing summary reasons for failure.

Selecting appropriate modalities: The type of modality is important when considering whether a culture of learning from failure is easily established. Typical grant funding, payment by results or, for example, concessional financing in development projects may not tolerate much or any deviation from the results promised without penalty of some sort. In these modalities, finances are provided on the promise of results agreed at the start, so there is little incentive to deviate or report where things are not working so well. Adaptively managed programs may be the exception to this rule and encourage agility in making changes based on rapidly gathered and analyzed data. We do not discuss this modality here as it is beyond the scope and focus of the report.

Challenge Funds and Innovation Prizes tend to be smaller investments (particularly for innovation prizes) across a portfolio of projects, often with the aim of surfacing new solutions or imitating or adapting existing ones. This distributes risk across a larger number of potentially successful projects rather than trying to 'back a winner'. This means that the appetite for risk of failure is often higher among donors or investors and therefore gives reassurance to grantees that a certain degree of failure is tolerable as long as there is a system in place to ensure any learning is shared. There is, however, a balance to be struck here – see next point.

Rigidity versus flexibility of targets – balancing accountability and learning: There is a need to balance flexibility (to allow a focus on learning) with rigidity (to ensure there is a degree of accountability), particularly for public funds. This is often managed by agreeing a tolerable degree of failure and use of funding in advance. Agreeing overall outcomes (which could explicitly be to learn from the project) but

[14] MacClune (2018) https://www.i-s-e-t.org/single-post/2018/10/22/Why-Celebrate-Failure-Lessons-from-Implementing-Water-Resilience [accessed 16 March 2020]

allowing flexibility on the path to get there (activities and outputs) is one way to achieve this.

Focus on the 'L' in MEL: Once a culture of openness and trust has been built and an appropriate modality selected, there is a need for a systematic way of generating and collecting evidence and learning on what has not worked and, critically, why. Designing a MEL system to support this intentionally is critical. This requires an understanding of the information needs of those who will use the learning. It also requires a balance between irrefutable evidence of a project's success (perhaps via a full Randomized Control Trial – RCT) and more rapidly assembled evidence of the sense of direction – that is, recurrent monitoring data. In GRP, some projects used both approaches, combining experimental evaluations with more reflective and frequent exercises modelled on after action reviews and gathered every three to six months over a 19-24month period. These were supported by a set of MEL guidance notes that prompted each grantee to share aspects of their project that were working well, those that were not and the reasons why, as well as anything they were doing differently as a result.

Being mindful of unintended consequences: If stated outcomes are achieved but there are deleterious effects elsewhere, how should the tradeoffs be handled? While GRP's appetite for risk of project failure was perhaps higher than in other programs, there was an acknowledgment that within a development context there is arguably a greater responsibility to adopt a 'do no harm' principle. Projects were often (intentionally) working with some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in a particular context. This required careful consideration of balancing the risk of introducing new and potentially risky innovations into vulnerable communities and 'testing' in that context. Risk of a start-up business failing in a developed country context has implications for the innovator and funder/sponsor, but testing new, possibly fallible, ways of increasing food productivity in food-insecure areas could have serious implications for local participating communities. While there were no instances of this in GRP, it is a very important consideration and was closely monitored by the program.

External factors causing delays: At times, external events beyond the control of both the project and GRP may cause delays. Examples of this range from a key funder receiving new instructions from its government or encountering delays in processing for other reasons; extreme contextual events; and delayed delivery by third parties. It is important to be mindful of eventualities like this, to map possible events and to try to include contingency plans for both GRP and the projects.

Summary

GRP's focus on learning from the outset and an associated uncommonly high appetite for risk of failure led to the creation of an 'ecosystem' of support and doing 'business unusual'. This is represented in Figure 2 below, which provides a schematic overview of the GRP project/grantee development over the course of GRP, the ways in which GRP has supported them to move to scale and some of the necessary steps to do so. This is based on the concept of the 'Valley of Death', which is commonly applied to start-ups and represents failure to progress to scale. In GRP's case, there was continuous assessment not only of results but also of the model and approach to

building resilience, the gap analysis and action plans developed jointly between the project and the Incubator. This, combined with leadership development, a suite of support mechanisms and tolerance for failure (when accompanied by learning), means that the projects have reduced the occurrence of failure and, in some cases, continue their work without GRP funding or even move to scale.

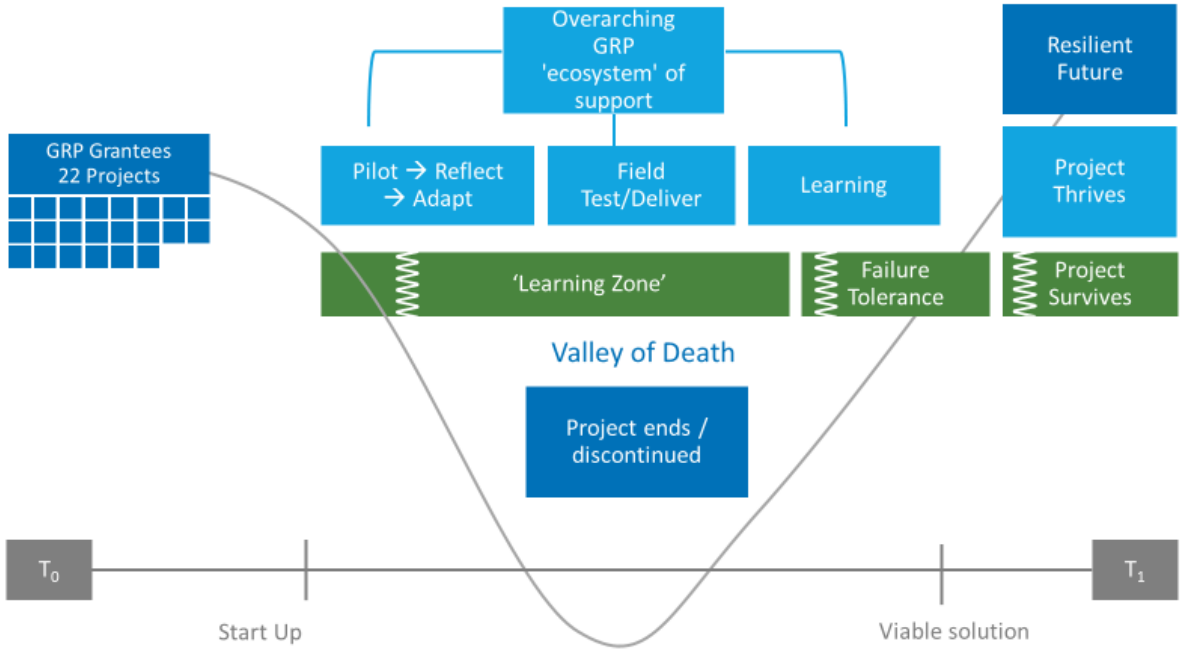


Figure 2: Diagram to show how GRP has supported innovative projects to overcome the 'Valley of Death' through focused support and cycles of testing and learning (adapted from a commonly used schematic used to represent the process of establishing a 'start-up')

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence collected from GRP case studies and literature we offer some recommendations to ensure that projects or programs and those involved in them are able to establish a culture of learning from failure, with improved development outcomes and climate-resilient communities as an intended result:

Learn (quickly) from failure: This means projects should have learning and flexibility built into their designs, encourage a degree of experimentation and risk-taking (while adhering to the principle of 'do no harm') and use monitoring and evaluation as a feedback system that fuels real-time learning – especially learning from failure. Do not be afraid to quickly stop 'solutions' that are not working. The openness to working in this way will be influenced by project timelines, the organizational culture and how internal feedback loops happen.

Consider the risks or implications of ignoring failure: It is important to ask what the implications are of not being open to learning from failure and sharing what has changed as a result. This means projects become stuck in an eternal cycle of pilots that do not work, with commensurate investment potentially wasted. There is also a risk of not addressing an underlying problem but instead continuously addressing the 'symptom'.

Projects must design in a culture of learning from the start and find tools and mechanisms to respond: To define appropriate resilience-building solutions, projects need to 'probe-sense-respond' in such a way that evidence, knowledge and practice are emergent. Interventions will need to be refined and enhanced following improved understanding of what works. This may mean that a phased rollout of projects is better than committing all at once, but with a view (and imperative) to scale rapidly those interventions and solutions that have proven effective. Sub-annual, beneficiary-led data may inform better rapid decision-making for tactical adjustments, whereas annual reflections may support better strategic course-correction.

Work closely with the projects in a structured way: A close relationship helps in identifying and understanding any weaknesses and emerging opportunities, and to spot any failure early on. This focus on building a common culture of trust and openness is critical, with the option of mentoring and coaching throughout the project cycle.

Learning through the entire innovation cycle. Develop systems to allow for learning and testing of innovations for resilience building, which could include:

1. Drawing together existing available evidence on tested approaches to understand what approaches to building resilience work, which mechanisms are particularly effective and what may be learned from others.
2. Deciding on the pace of testing necessary for effective learning about what is working and what is not; this is likely to be dependent on the particular activity being implemented.
3. Developing a learning agenda and timeline, collaboratively with engaged partners, that determines both how to generate and how to use learning.
4. Designing in longer-term impact evaluations commensurate with the scale of the intervention.

Timing and flexibility: Build flexibility into the technical approach and management processes of the project and associated implementation activities by:

1. Ensuring funding, management and implementing partners have a shared agreement and processes for adapting implementation activities before implementation begins; this should ensure that workplan, funding and reporting are efficiently adapted in line with one another.
2. Understanding the context of implementation and being aware of the climatic, political or other events that may arise and affect the program; track this through a risk register that is regularly updated.
3. Building in flexibility to the implementation activity by employing an adaptive management approach that specifically seeks to identify and respond to learning through the course of the program or activity; encourage stakeholders to be engaged to develop this approach together to ensure shared understanding and buy-in.
4. Planning for intensive rather than light-touch grantee engagement, particularly if grantees are at an early stage in the innovation process.

5. Putting in place appropriate results frameworks and measurable milestones to establish a clear understanding of what the project is expected to deliver and enable performance-based payments.
6. Ensuring an open, transparent and productive relationship between the grantee and fund manager.
7. Combining appropriate technical assistance and capacity-building with good risk and performance management.

Identify failure thresholds and convey expectations clearly: Establishing the rules of the game from the outset is critical. This includes individual discussions about the thresholds or limits of failure and how learning will be identified and shared. It should be clear who makes decisions about what a failing or underperforming project looks like and decides how to act. This includes deciding when to close a project/solution/innovation that has reached or exceeded a threshold of tolerable failure, and when to let it continue to fail at no extra costs, perhaps to maximize learning, as long as there is no identified risk to poor and vulnerable people.

It is important to note that these thresholds vary across a portfolio of projects depending on the risks for and impacts on ‘at-risk populations’ and potentially the type of implementing entity – for example smaller grassroots organizations versus larger international non-governmental organizations.

Consider phasing to allow testing at the right time: It is important to identify a period or cycle during which testing and innovating is most intense, in between periods of implementing before reflecting and reviewing. These may be pre-determined – for example three-month ’sprint’ cycles – or they may be more *ad hoc*.

Consider failure potential and risk from the outset: Considering characteristics of a viable model at selection stage is important, as is considering the openness of a grantee to learning from failure and sharing opening. This also requires having the right people on a selection panel – subject specialists (in this case resilience) and also innovation specialists.

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