Independent Evaluation of Sightsavers Innovation Fund Round 2
Executive Summary

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Programme Description

The Innovation Fund Round Two supported 9 operational and 5 research projects over a period of 18 months ending March 2014. The broad objective was to pilot new and innovative approaches to meeting eye health and broader disability challenges.

Purpose of evaluation

The primary aim of this evaluation is to provide an independent evaluation of the extent to which the projects addressed Sightsavers' implementation challenges in the areas of eye health (EH), inclusive education (IE) and social inclusion (SI) for all people living with disabilities This should help Sightsavers focus its learning and enable the organisation and its development partners to replicate and / or scale up successful Innovation.

Methodology and Analytic Strategy

An analytic matrix across 10 assessment criteria for the nine operational projects and five criteria for the remaining research projects was completed. Five of the projects were visited by the evaluation team enabling more in depth assessment, while the remaining projects were assessed entirely from documented plans and reports. (Visits were made to SIF113 inclusive education work in Kenya, SIF148 capacity building for DPOs in India, SIF191 assessment of intensive case management in Bangladesh and SIF 423 to set up a disability employment service in The Gambia. SIF104 work in Delhi slums was not visited but the evaluators met with the Programme Development Adviser). An assessment was made of the logical frameworks for each project to assess coherence of design, theory of change and the use made of the log frames in managing and monitoring implementation and achievement of results.

Overall findings

Round 2 successfully identified and funded incremental innovation addressing both the DFID and Sightsavers definitions. In particular, whilst the majority of individual projects funded could not be described as high risk, Sightsavers' institutional commitment to funding a range of organisations that it had not previously worked with was in itself a high risk strategy.

Importantly, the Fund has also been a starting point and driver of an important institutional change process aiming to strengthen innovative thinking across the organisation.

Within a time frame of 18 months, in global terms the Fund has largely achieved its purpose. The evaluation highlights that seven of 14 projects delivered innovation for tackling barriers to promoting the 3 thematic areas. Ten projects are promising enough to take forward into Round 3, either to fully replicate or to test more rigorously.

The sharing and dissemination of lessons from the projects has been achieved through a number of activities coordinated by Sightsavers as well as some effort made by the projects to share the reach of their pilot projects. A Sightsavers edition of Insight Plus (Issue 8 December 2013) included descriptions of the progress made by four of the 14 projects along with other articles on Innovation work. In June 2013 representatives from project grantees presented their work and shared experiences with each other and with Sightsavers staff at Sightsavers annual programme meeting. A number of blogs have been started or are planned and a small number of informal networks established. The Innovation Fund has influenced Sightsavers organisationally: managers report shifts in strategic direction towards reviewing approaches to programme design, with the idea of testing and implementing innovations. The Fund has been the starting point for a change process: a Programmes and Strategies Department is now part of the strategic design process providing technical leadership. The Fund has broadened the partnerships Sightsavers has beyond those established though country programmes.

Findings:
Relevance and Innovation
All projects were seen to have demonstrated the relevance of the innovation supported to the set implementation challenges. Seven projects fully demonstrated the planned innovation and seven partially succeeded in demonstrating innovation.

Learning
Questions around learning for grantees, Sightsavers and the wider community were explored in the evaluation. Seven projects scored Satisfactory and seven Caution or below. In projects of 18 months a balance is needed between introducing systems for capturing learning yet not building in so much procedure that grantee trialling of the innovation is slowed down. Sightsavers would benefit in future from putting more systems in place to capture and apply learning, with respect to its own processes (selection, management etc.) as well as the maximising and synthesis of project learning.

Replication/scalability
The evaluators assessed the potential for innovations to be scaled up or replicated. Although 5 of 9 operational projects scored Satisfactory there is scope to more systematically develop and document evidence for project uptake by other agencies, including effective outcome monitoring and making the financial case for replication.

Effectiveness

The Fund has largely achieved its purpose. 7 of 14 projects delivered innovation and 10 projects are promising enough to be taken into round 3 – either to fully replicate or to test more rigorously. The Fund itself has been instrumental in driving change processes within Sightsavers aimed at strengthening innovative thinking across the organisation. Increased ownership by COs of innovation is a major achievement. More mechanisms are required to promote synergy and linkage between diverse organisations – for sharing, learning and maximising impact. More technical input to partners is required.

Impact

There was Insufficient Information available to assess outcome or impact in 3 projects, 8 projects were scored Caution or below, and 3 were considered Satisfactory. Whilst recognising that the Innovation Fund has a limited time frame and that its purpose is to explore new ideas and different approaches, there is probably a need to find greater balance between ideas and processes/systems for capturing change. In several research projects, information was being held pending publication of papers, at which point impact may be more evident.

Inclusion

Only operational projects were assessed for inclusiveness. In some instances Sightsavers considers inclusion a secondary issue – for example the improvement to a service technique that will benefit a broad population requiring treatment. In general, there was little inclusion information provided by grantees. Differences between the needs and situation of women and girls compared with men and boys, for example were not generally considered, nor obstacles for other excluded groups such as Dalits in India. Where information was disaggregated, by sex for example, there was limited analysis of its meaning.

Efficiency

In 6 projects Insufficient Information was found to assess whether costs had been calculated and tools used to collect evidence of cost effectiveness. Seven projects were scored caution or below and just one was satisfactory. Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) frameworks assessed were generally weak or absent. For innovation purposes Sightsavers has lessened its usual requirements with respect to outcome evidencing and financial analysis. In taking forward successful or promising projects from Round 2 Sightsavers at that point should expect more rigorous outcome and impact monitoring systems to be introduced by grantees for evidencing purposes as well as stronger financial analysis.

Coherence and coordination

Coherence with national policy frameworks was generally satisfactory as was consistency between innovation relevance and the ideas proposed. Most projects displayed logframe weaknesses however, making it difficult for partners to set up coherent monitoring frameworks against which to report on progress or evaluate achievement. Support to clarifying grantee logframes at the start of implementation may have ensured greater

overall coherence. There was little linkage between grantees, possibly representing a missed opportunity for synergy creation. Coordination could also have been stronger between grantees and different levels of Sightsavers' structure including technical experts.

Key recommendations

The recommendations arising from this evaluation are numerous. In many cases they echo similar points made in the evaluation of Round One of the Innovation Fund support. Reflection for a further round of Innovation project funding should be cognisant of the findings of both Rounds One and Two evaluation reports.

Key recommendations include:

- In line with Sightsavers' strategic realignment process, in the next funding round Sightsavers to screen ideas by linking Innovation Fund projects to programmes in ways that are focused, synergetic, and adding strategic value. The Innovation Fund may then add value to the strategic realignment process by looking at the global portfolio and modelling new approaches.

- Prioritise the completion of the Learning and Innovation strategy and apply it to Round 3, as well as establishing a policy framework for a strengthened organisational knowledge and learning management culture.

- Continue to build and strengthen the learning and sharing systems that have been developed that link Innovation work with strategic change processes within Sightsavers as well as its move towards leadership, as a learning organisation on disability in development.

- Projects in future to present a coherent log frame and 'theory of change' that explains not only what the programme will do but what change it will achieve in line with Sightsavers strategic priorities. This could then be revised during a period preceding the first report.

- Sightsavers to reflect on whether the current balance between supporting innovation and systems development is producing a level of qualitative or change data sufficient for learning purposes.