Sponsorship Innovation & Learning Fund

Summary Report

Save the Children

2020

Introduction

In 2009, the Save the Children's Sponsorship Program launched the Sponsorship Innovation and Learning Fund (SILF) to identify, build evidence for, and scale programs that solve problems for children in new ways, by leveraging existing programmatic expertise within the cross-country laboratory of Sponsorship programming. Over the past eleven years, SILF has disbursed over three million dollars in funding to 46 innovative projects in 19 countries. In 2020, Demografix was hired to evaluate SILF to help Sponsorship understand SILF's achievements and accelerate long-term impact and innovation within Sponsorship.

The review focused on five themes thematic areas:

- The history of SILF in terms of organization and activities
- The guiding principles of SILF and how recipients of SILF awards ("innovators") themselves perceive SILF
- The impact of SILF-funded innovations and the determinants of success or failure for these projects
- The degree to which SILF has successfully fostered learning
- The strengths and weaknesses of SILF, its overall value for money, and recommendations for improvement

Methodology

Between April and September 2020, we reviewed SILF documentation, sent a short survey to innovators (completed by 38 innovators addressing 36 of the 46 projects), and conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) with 26 innovators, covering 94% of all SILF investment. From these sources, we built a SILF project database of key variables for each innovation. The quantitative analysis of the collected data is primarily descriptive, while the qualitative data were analyzed thematically according to the key evaluation questions.

The history of the SILF

The SILF emerged from a broader effort to identify and build evidence for promising new programs. Initially using leftover technical assistance funds, the SILF first solicited ideas from SCUS technical advisors. With support from key Sponsorship offices, the fund steadily increased the amount of funding available for innovations, rising from $46,500 in 2009 to around $400,000 today, with the bulk of the funding going to country offices in Asia (41% of total SILF funding) and Africa (33%). The increase in funding has been accompanied by a steady effort to increase the transparency and accessibility of the SILF, with all Sponsorship staff invited to submit concepts, which are evaluated by a committee comprised of representatives from across Sponsorship, large donor country offices, and thematic representatives. Innovations provide annual reports to the committee and may request repeat funding if the results suggest it is merited.

Guiding Principles of the SILF

1. **Solving everyday programmatic problems.** SILF is driven by a desire to solve problems that arise organically from program experience, the urgent everyday needs facing the communities Save the Children supports.
2. **Innovating incrementally.** SILF has focused on funding new pieces of programming and learning that create marginal value for existing Sponsorship offerings and then transplanting these solutions a few countries at a time.
3. **Aiming for scale.** SILF funds innovations that have potential to scale to multiple Sponsorship countries. SILF has often catalyzed program scale by funding key pieces of program expansion, such as pilot programs, evaluations, and adaptation guidelines.
4. **Embracing failure.** SILF tolerates failure, providing innovators with the freedom to push the envelope and experiment with new ideas more than is usually possible in Sponsorship.
5. **Facilitating participation through simple and flexible processes.** To encourage wide participation, barriers to entry are low. Application, selection, and reporting processes are light, and funding is not tracked.
6. **Harnessing existing expertise and experience.** SILF purposefully relies on Save the Children's own in-house technical expertise and local knowledge to push solutions, taking advantage of pre-existing relationships between global technical experts and local country office staff.
7. **Linking innovation to Global Breakthroughs.** SILF has tied its selection criteria to overarching goals within Save the Children.

Innovator Feedback on SILF Approach and Processes

Innovators themselves described three key ways that SILF contributes to Sponsorship's mission.

1. **Creativity Outlet**. SILF injects enthusiasm into what is often seen as a "cut-and-paste" culture and leverages passionate and strategic staff to develop more nimble and impactful programming.
2. **Bandwidth Cushion**. By funding strategic, incremental improvements of existing approaches or programs that may no longer be considered "innovative," SILF sometimes provides a critical buffer for innovators to advance programming by covering the time required to innovate and general budgetary flexibility.
3. **Laboratory**. SILF encourages tweaking and tinkering with programming while generating evidence for what works. The evidence this generates allows innovators to more effectively promote programs for scale.

Overall, innovators deeply appreciated all of these functions and praised SILF's flexibility, transparency, and accessibility. On the other hand, they outlined a few complaints. These were 1) pressure to align their proposals to the perceived priorities of SILF leadership, 2) pressure to underestimate their budget needs for the sake of being selected, 3) frustration with the short, annual funding cycle, and occasionally, 4) a lack of ownership over their own SILF award disbursements.

Innovation Success and its Determinants

We defined the success of SILF projects according to Table 1 below, encompassing projects' achievements relative to their own objectives, scale, influence in program or strategic practice in Sponsorship or beyond, evidence bases, and external demand and funding. Programmatic and learning projects had different criteria as shown; learning projects were judged exclusively on their influence on program or strategic practice. Based on these criteria, projects were categorized as very high (innovations had some measure of system-level impact), high/medium (innovations strongly influenced program practice and generated robust evidence and/or were scaled up), or low success (failed to meet their own objectives, have little evidence of impact, and typically were discontinued). Table 2 below shows the SILF innovations that fall into each category.

Determinants of Success

Innovation is complex and rarely formulaic, but seven factors predicted program success:

1) **Ownership**: The implementing team should be personally invested in the project's success. Ideally, both the country staff and the technical advisors would share this excitement and commitment, but in general, country office ownership is more important for program pilots while technical advisor ownership is crucial for scale outside of the Impact Area. For example, the team behind the Gender Equality Teacher Trainers program, which is already High success and swiftly growing, described the program design process as highly collaborative and iterative between Philippines staff, an SCUS technical advisor, and an SCUS MEAL staff person.

2) **Adaptability**: Successful programs are flexible enough to work in multiple contexts, and innovators bolster such adaptiveness by conducting formative research, monitoring pilots closely, and adopting a "toolkit" design with a menu of optional, complementary program components. For example, the Duta Baca project conducted formative conversations with school administrators and students to ensure that the benefitting children set the program's priorities and followed this up with regular visits to schools to gauge inventory and student response to the program, contributing to its local success.

3) **Evidence**: Early, rigorous evaluations become powerful selling points to the stakeholders who can scale innovation programs. Most Very High success innovations were evaluated causally, while Low success innovations were unlikely to even have a formal MEAL plan. An example of the importance of evidence to success is Literacy Boost, which from the outset aimed to develop compelling, causal evidence in early countries before expanding to others.

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4) **Trendy topics**: Sponsorship offices, governments, and donors are more likely to overlook shaky evidence in adopting a program if it addresses a trendy problem at Save the Children or in the international development community. As a result, these projects may receive additional funding or be taken to scale more rapidly than projects focusing on less 'trendy' topics. For example, Waliku has attracted funding from donors in large part because it is a highly technological social enterprise innovation, despite having no formal MEAL for the first two years that it was operating.

5) **Partners and networks**: Innovators with greater access to government and donor networks are better able to secure partnerships that leverage evidence to propel the program into larger arenas. For example, Heart to HEART was able to establish strong connections to provincial departments of education, social welfare and health in the Philippines, who then invited Save the Children to train them on the program and then expanded the program into two additional provinces.

6) **Bandwidth**: Innovation projects falter more often from lack of staff time than lack of staff effort. Sponsorship office bandwidth limits program implementation; TA bandwidth limits program dissemination and scaling. In particular, a lack of time and competing demands make rigorous MEAL efforts very challenging. Furthermore, while Sponsorship is fortunate to employ many passionate innovators, the success of innovations often depends on individual 'champions', meaning that innovations often fail to advance if these individuals leave the institution. Examples of this latter challenge include the AD Integrated Curriculum and the Technology for Education Program Monitoring programs, which were designed by passionate technical advisors who then departed Save the Children.

7) **Ability to Leverage SILF**: Innovations that rely exclusively on SILF are less likely to scale outside of the Impact Area, both because SILF awards are small and because the most driven innovators seek other support for their innovations. This is not an indictment of SILF's value-add. Over half of the High and Very High success SILF projects were either "likely impossible without" or "significantly accelerated by" SILF. Rather, SILF plays dual roles. On one hand, it plants effective projects within individual Impact Areas, and on the other, it spurs pre-existing, co-funded projects by funding key pieces of their growth, such as a robust evaluation. Both are incredibly valuable functions. At the same time, SILF rarely bridges these two functions—i.e. it does not independently take its own promising local initiatives to scale.

Fostering learning within the SILF and through the innovations

Learning is critical for spreading innovative ideas and amplifying the impact of SILF funding. Four key functions of learning are especially relevant: generating knowledge, documenting knowledge, disseminating knowledge, and systematizing knowledge.

Generation of knowledge.

In terms of monitoring and evaluation, 18 of 46 projects, representing 60.4% of SILF investment, have either a causal evaluation or formal MEAL analysis behind them. Minimally, this means that innovators conducted structured data analysis with sound inferences on program effectiveness. Factors that prevented adequate MEAL of SILF programs include a lack of bandwidth and a lack of consistent focus on MEAL across programs.

Documentation of knowledge.

Innovators document lessons learned from their projects well. When projects have strong MEAL strategies, the knowledge generated is typically both more robust and better documented. However, even those projects without a formal MEAL strategy also generated important lessons, usually innovators' personal observations and recommendations reported at the conclusion of the award year.

Dissemination of knowledge is underfunded, because SILF innovators lacked bandwidth for the time-consuming, iterative dissemination required to persuade stakeholders to act on program evidence. Many innovators conflated dissemination of learning with "advocacy," revealing that to them, learning was more about pushing programs forward than reflecting. Indeed, innovators rarely shared lessons learned from failure.

The key medium for the sharing of knowledge about SILF projects both inside and outside of Save the Children is networking, including by word of mouth, through one-shot presentations, and, more rarely, through organized learning exchanges within Save the Children.

Systematization of knowledge is lacking. Innovators reported that there was no central cross-learning platform to share lessons from SILF projects systematically, and their single most common recommendation for improving SILF was to create one. They lamented missing out on useful opportunities to learn from other SILF projects and desired easy access to key takeaways from all SILF projects to help them find tips and ideas for program design and to avoid other projects' pitfalls. Relying on innovators to have the time, networks, and instincts to share lessons stunts the dissemination of learning.

Conclusions

Over the past eleven years, SILF has shown that remarkable innovation within Sponsorship can play a key role in furthering the mission of Save the Children. Its key functions are to provide staff with a creativity outlet, a bandwidth cushion, and a laboratory. While most SILF innovations operate at a relatively small scale, many innovations emerging from SILF have had outsize impact within Save the Children and beyond, shaping SC Common Approaches, enhancing the ability of the organization to raise funds around key issues, and cementing the reputation of Save the Children as a leader in areas such as work with very young adolescents, improving the quality of schooling for young children, and menstrual hygiene management.

Despite the overall success of SILF, there are areas where it can be improved. Low innovator bandwidth is a major constraint on innovation success, no matter how driven innovators are. Moreover, enhancing the ability of staff to learn from the experiences of fellow innovators is key to achieving the full potential of the fund. The impact of SILF is hampered by the lack of effective learning mechanisms within Sponsorship, limiting innovators' ability to rapidly inform and improve programming

Recommendations

1) **Increase SILF's budget.** SILF works. Expand it.

2) **Keep SILF's fundamental flexibility.** Continue empowering Sponsorship staff to realize their visions for supporting children. Do not restrict eligibility by more narrowly defining innovation, maintain light application and reporting processes, and advertise widely.

3) **Strategically advance promising SILF programs that have not reached their potential.** Identify strategic investments for Sponsorship that push forward SILF's existing portfolio. Fund evaluations for promising programs with more scale than evidence. Fund dissemination of learning for promising programs with more evidence than scale.

4) **Increase average award amounts, and continue guaranteeing two years of funding.** Currently, SILF awards are too small to take promising innovations to scale alone. Consider taking on that role by increasing award sizes for program innovations that have demonstrated pilot success.

5) **Help innovators fail faster and more successfully.** If SILF re-funds a project that has not accomplished much in the first year, as with a two-year guaranteed award, actively help innovators salvage or pivot from their original plans.

6) **Intentionally build dissemination and learning into SILF budgets.** The first thing that a bandwidth-constrained innovator will drop is dissemination. Enable innovators to iteratively share their learnings by explicitly funding this networking process. This will help them form partnerships for scaling. Ensure that MEAL plans include and are aligned with learning dissemination plans.

7) **Systematically accelerate learning from the SILF portfolio by funding new "public goods" for learning.** This was the single most common recommendation in KII interviews. Create an open-source platform for sharing lessons learned and require innovators to contribute key takeaways from their innovation experiences. Maintain a dynamic, transparent database of SILF projects. Fund more learning exchanges between program teams driving similar SILF or Sponsorship programs.

8) **Hire or restructure Sponsorship MEAL staff to empower, connect, and guide SILF innovators more actively.** With this staff, maintain active relationships with innovators, connect them with resources and expertise they might need, and enact recommendations 3, 5, 6, and 7.

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Table 1: Success Typology Criteria

Success Level	Programmatic Projects		Learning Projects
Very High	Repeatedly achieves program objectives in multiple countries; Strong influence on program or strategic practice at global Sponsorship level or beyond; Strong evidence base for program impact; Demand and funding extend beyond Sponsorship		Learning outputs achieved with strong program or strategic influence at global Sponsorship level or beyond
	More Scaling, Less Evidence of Impact	**More Evidence of Impact, Less Scaling**	
High	Achieved all stated objectives; Strong influence on program practice at country level or above; Moderate evidence of impact; Demand and funding extend beyond Sponsorship	Achieved all stated objectives Strong evidence of impact on beneficiaries; Project survives in some form, may have expanded within an Impact Area	Learning outputs achieved with moderate program or strategic influence at global Sponsorship level or beyond
Medium	Achieved some stated objectives; Had limited influence on program practice at country level or above; Limited evidence of impact; Project survives in some form, may have expanded within an Impact Area	Achieved all stated objectives; Moderate evidence of impact on beneficiaries; Had limited influence on program practice; Discontinued	Learning outputs achieved with limited program or strategic influence at global Sponsorship level or beyond
Low	Did not achieve most program objectives; Little to no evidence of impact or evidence of little to no impact; Did not influence program practice at the country level or above Discontinued		Learning objectives not achieved or achieved with little to no program or strategic influence

Table 2: Success of SILF Project

Success Level	Programmatic Projects		Learning Projects
Very High	Interactive Audio Instruction (Malawi, 2009) Literacy Boost (Multiple countries, 2009-2013) Numeracy Boost (Multiple countries, 2012-2018) Choices, Voices, Promises (Nepal, Ethiopia, 2009-2014) Building Brains (Multiple countries, 2017-2019) Emergent Literacy and Math (Multiple countries, 2013-2016) Menstrual Hygiene Management (Multiple countries, 2014-2019)		IDELA (Multiple countries, 2014-2017)
High	**More Scaling, Less Evidence of Impact**	**More Evidence of Impact, Less Scaling**	
	Waliku 2.0 (Indonesia, 2019)* Gender Equality Training and Toolkit for Early Childhood Educators (Philippines, 2018-2020)*	Essential Package (Malawi, 2012) Duta Baca (Indonesia, 2017-2018) Health Boost (Bangladesh, 2016-2017)	Longitudinal Study in Ethiopia (Ethiopia, 2017-2018)* Inclusive Education (Uganda, Malawi, 2017-2019)
Medium	Support Children with Disabilities (Vietnam, 2016) RISE Tool (Multiple countries, 2016) Heart to HEART (Philippines, 2018) Child Health and Development (Egypt, 2012-2013) My First Baby (Bolivia, Nepal, 2009-2015)	Raising Caregiving Capabilities through Psychosocial Support Groups (Nepal, 2019-2020)* Malaria in Schools (Malawi, Mali, 2010-2015)	Resources for Remediation (Global, 2015)
Low	School lunch boxes (Vietnam, 2016) ECCD Re-design (Philippines, 2011) ECCD Fatherhood Program (Bangladesh, 2011) Involving Adolescents in ECCD (Bolivia, 2011) Citizen Reporting Platform for Violence Against Children (Bangladesh, 2016-2017) Multilingual Learners Toolkit (Mexico, 2017) Use of Technology in Basic Education (Afghanistan, 2019)* Social and Emotional Learning Foundations (SELF) Program (Mexico, 2019)* AD Integrated Curriculum / FLASH Toolkit (Malawi, Uganda, 2017-2019)		Review of Violence-free Schools Initiatives (Global, 2017) Technology for Education Program Monitoring (Multiple countries, 2018) Very Young Adolescent Signature Program (Global, 2014, 2016) AD Assessment (Nepal, 2017-2018)