Resource type	Example	Date created	2021	Last reviewed	2022

Resource series   Designing donor MEL systems and practices

Project   Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Toolkit for Grantmakers and Grantees

▌ MANAGE an evaluation or evaluation system

The Economic Justice Program's monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning sub-strategy 2021–24

> "Values alone are not enough to achieve distributive justice—and that's where the evidence comes in. Fairness can be achieved only if full and unbiased information is available about current conditions, and about the costs and benefits of one way of acting—one policy option—versus another. 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"
>
> Ruth Levine, *The Moral Case for Evidence in Policy-Making* (2017)

Overview

Rigorous and thoughtful monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) practices are crucial to moving the needle towards a future with greater economic justice. Like many at OSF, the problems EJP seeks to redress—such as corruption, corporate overreach, the market's interpretation of the value of care work--and the outcomes we seek to achieve--building worker power, improving fiscal justice, and reshaping corporate influence--are complex and multifaceted. If simple solutions existed, we would know how, where, and when to act and spread our resources. Without simple recipes for change, the most responsible and effective way we can ensure EJP's resources and actions enable greater economic justice now and in the future is through adequate MERL.[1] To operate responsibly and effectively in these spaces we must clearly articulate our intended outcomes and understanding of how change happens, review and collect evidence about our work and the work of our partners, and use this evidence to refine and improve our practice over time.

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[1] 2016 World Bank Study of 1,300 projects between 2008-2014 found that the quality of M&E systems is positively and significantly correlated with achieving relevant outcomes (Raimondo, 2016, Policy Research Working Paper 7726).

This sub-strategy outlines the key ways in which MERL will accompany EJP's 2021–24 strategy, namely to:

- **Measure and evaluate the impact and contributions of our work** to enhance strategy implementation, ensure accountability for our decisions, and adapt strategies in light of learning through a range of fit-for-purpose methods and tools.

- **Structure and guide our learning:** Identifying and uncovering answers to big questions about our program's hypotheses and assumptions by guiding a culture of curiosity and appetite for learning from ourselves, our partners, and the wider field.

- **Connect the dots across our work and priorities to enable us to be more than the sum of our parts:** Supplementing and focusing EJP's strategy implementation with evidence and learning, and spotting opportunities for greater coordination and focus.

This sub-strategy outlines our vision for *internal* MERL practice. This does not mean that we will not consider external audiences and the ability to share information gathered more broadly (indeed, we will seek to do this wherever possible), but our firm boundary/limit is the universe of EJP's work (directly and indirectly via grantees and investees).

What orients our MERL work

NORTH STAR: The Economic Justice Program is aware of its impact (positive and negative), uses evidence from this impact to actively carry out our mission, lives our values, and work toward our long-term vision.

The **primary purposes of EJP's MERL practices** are to improve ourselves as grant-makers and investors, foster a greater and deeper understanding of the fields and contexts in which we work, and rigorously (but flexibly and realistically) assess progress towards our goals and the goals identified by our grantees and investees.

We work on MERL across three dimensions (in descending order of priority):

1. **The work of EJP:** Assessing our distribution of resources and the impacts of our direct actions in relationship to EJP's values and North Stars

2. **The work of our grantees and investees:** Observing changes and their related causal mechanisms of the outcomes most relevant to EJP, and

3. **The shifts in the field:** Tracking, synthesizing, and analyzing relevant landscape or context changes to the fields in which we operate.

As this document outlines EJP's internal MERL practice, our primary audiences include the EJP team, EJP Advisory Board, OSF senior management, and OSF Global Board. Secondary audiences include grantees and investees, the OSF network, partners, and philanthropies that could benefit and learn from improvements in our internal practices.

EJP'S GUIDING MERL PRINCIPLES

Demand driven: We will respond to clear demands from staff, grantees, and the broader field that and 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 strive to recognize 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. We aim to be humble and not take credit that is undue and unearned.

Share what we learn and know: Recognizing that perennial problem of the philanthropic "Black Box," where information comes in, but rarely comes back out, we will share with partners, grantees, investees, and the wider public our MERL data and the lessons we learn whenever we can.

Resource-conscious: We will consider, develop, and leverage existing knowledge and research.

What we measure and how

We track and reflect on what role we and our grantees and investees have in changes happening across the economic justice landscape. We will undertake comprehensive research, learning, and evaluation activities, and will develop well-defined strategic, thematic, and portfolio-level goals and indicators. EJP's emerging and established portfolios will operate on different "learning tracks" to account for their different levels of knowledge and experience (see box).

To achieve our long-term aims, as articulated in our North Stars, we have identified nearer-term, tangible milestones at the strategy level and portfolio levels. Designing comprehensive, useful goals and indicators, and establishing reliable, relevant modes to track them takes time. It is an iterative process of consultation, testing, and tweaking, which we are already deeply engaged in and will continue throughout this four-year strategy cycle. We do this with portfolio leads to foster ownership of MERL processes and ensure that, as the strategy progresses, leads can drive key steps of the evaluation process.

The Strategy & Impact (S&I) unit will lead the EJP team (as a whole and in sub-teams) through key annual reflection exercises, assist in portfolio and grant evaluation efforts, and attempt to draw out key lessons, reflections, and evidence relevant across multiple portfolios. We also intend to undertake key evaluations of program-wide and strategy work over the life of the strategy (final calendar and evaluation moments pending). We will work with portfolio leads to undertake these, as our goal is to foster ownership of MERL processes and that as the strategy progresses leads are capable of leading on key steps of the evaluation process.

Knowing where we are in our journey

Track 1 | ESTABLISHED: Portfolio encouraged to use a field-building lens in their efforts, and provide longer-term consistent funding, but will also be encouraged to use grantmaking to close important gaps or test new approaches where needed. Accountability will be derived from the application of existing knowledge in these fields, field-building efforts, and—we hope—from actors and partners in these spaces about our choices.

Track 2 | EMERGING: Portfolios are encouraged to resist impulses to exercise high grantmaking agency (in most cases) and to instead learn from existing actors, thought leaders, activists, **advocates**, and funders in these spaces. Portfolios are expected to make more regular, and likely radical, adaptations to their assumptions and scope. Accountability will be in the form of learning about our relevance and added value to the space (including where our added value is found to be "none to little"), refining their hypotheses for change, and determining the ultimate scope of our work in this field.

Who measures?

EJP's Strategy and Impact team will lead the program's work on monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL), strategic planning, knowledge management, research, and innovation/design. Though aspects of these responsibilities must be embedded in and distributed across the program (see more in the roles and responsibilities section), this team will have the primary responsibility and accountability for decisions, systems, and practices related to monitoring, evaluation, and learning across the EJP program.

Our primary source of data is certainly provided by its grantees and investees through their reporting and other forms of regular exchanges with the EJP team, i.e., Eligibility Assessments and Due Diligence Assessments done before a grant or investment is approved, field visits, updates provided by grantees on reports and research they produce. As a secondary source whenever evaluation and learning moments require the team will bring in and manage external evaluators to support additional and/or specific data requests, e.g., portfolio-level evaluations, and research focused on strategy-level learning questions. The team will also support program officers and investment leads to coordinate complementary data collection at the portfolio level, and to work with grantees on specific evaluation assignments whenever the evaluation in question is relevant for the portfolio or EJP as a whole, or where methodological aspects can help advance other grantees in similar fields.

Dream Platform (a salesforce-based product currently moving towards phase II under contract with Vera Solutions) will allow us to better incorporate MERL into our program's practices and reflections, by establishing a system that allows an easy way for staff to aggregate relevant results and reflect on trends/themes, and by setting expectations for staff to record the results of what EJP funds. Dream is being built to align as much as possible with the portfolio and grantee reporting structure, which should make it easy for the EJP team to integrate the use of the platform as part of our learning practices.

How we learn and adapt

Learning Agendas are increasingly cited as a best practice for promoting evidence-based decision-making, generating new and more relevant knowledge and evidence, and catalyzing organizational shifts in building and sustaining a culture of learning.[2] A critical feature of a learning agenda is to adopt questions that can flexibly accommodate a range of levels of inquiry and methods, but collectively allow for conclusions to be drawn. A growing pool of evidence on learning agendas suggests that they are most effective when defined collectively and are used dynamically, adjusting learning activities (e.g. evaluations, peer exchanges, fail fest) and

[2] Landscape Analysis of Learning Agendas: USAID/Washington and Beyond; Laura Ahearn, Matthew Baker, Katherine Haugh, Ilana Shapiro; April 11, 2017

products (e.g. reports, videos, infographics) over time. We will pull together answers (in the form of evidence) using a wide range of methods (including our existing grantmaking and investment practices) to flexibly allow us to interrogate our assumptions during this strategy period, and incorporate our learning in the next strategy.

For the 2021–24 strategy, in addition to the portfolio learning agendas, we will explore the following shared questions:

Question	Answers to this and related questions will help us…
Q1: What role do narratives have in shaping economic policy and practice?	Explore the feasibility of different narrative change strategies for economic justice and candidate economic justice portfolio outcomes
	Understand the connections between different approaches to narrative change and types of economic justice outcomes in terms of fit, sequencing, contexts, etc.
	Connect narrative change approaches to different EJP tools
	Evaluate and assess the impact of economic justice narrative change efforts alongside communications strategies.
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?	Better understand the (pre-)conditions, risks and strategies of an investment or private sector approach to succeed in public policy reform efforts to, e.g., provide public services and/or catalyze public capacity (e.g. enforcement of anti-corruption laws)
	Better connect grant-making and advocacy to investment-led approaches in these issues in terms of sequencing and coordination
Q3: How and under what conditions are social movements successful as paths to social impact (e.g., policy change, norm shifts, rebalancing of power)?	Better understand what role social movements can play as vectors of both impact and change for our portfolio goals (in tax, investor–state dispute settlement, and labor power)
	Better identify what risks different forms of engagement with philanthropy pose to social movements, even when this engagement proves an effective path to achieving impact

(Table continued overleaf)

Question	Answers to this and related questions will help us…
Q4: What is the role of financial markets and financial processes in generating challenges to economic justice objectives such as economic equality, transparency, and inclusivity?	Better understand the role of financial processes and product in shaping the challenges of and possibilities for the impact we seek in individual portfolios Better account for the risks to our activities in pursuit of impact in EJP portfolios Explore when and how governments, labor, and corporations react to financial processes and constraints

As the MERL team, we plan to make sure our MERL practices and objectives are also assessed and adapted according to the needs of the program over time. Like EJP's other sub-strategies, we will participate in an annual Review, Reflect, and Adapt session to assess the continued relevancy of this sub-strategy's key goals and objectives, as well as progress towards them. Benefiting from peer and SLT reflections as well, we will make changes to how, when, and what the team prioritizes and pushes forward. For larger projects (e.g. Dream Platform, MERL practice in grants/investments), we will build in additional review mechanisms including seeking external advice and reviews to ensure our practices are not only adequate for internal purposes but utilizing identified good practices in the wider field.

Goals & milestones of success for EJP's MERL team

(Table continued overleaf)

Goal	Milestones of success	
	Expect to see	**Would love to see**
Design and implement fit-for-purpose MERL systems and practices that prioritize accountability, learning, and impact	**EJP** has effective, relevant baseline data for its MERL framework across grants, investments and operations **EJP** team members actively applying a range of MERL practices with increasing proficiency and clarity **S&I team** seen as a guide and critical friend to portfolios, units, and SLT on program design and decisions	**OSF network, partners, and philanthropies** adopt practices championed or piloted by the S&I team **EJP Colleagues** alter their plans, targets, and decisions as a result of MERL practices **EJP Colleagues** review strategy based on evaluation findings (from EAP, FGP, and future evaluations)

Goal	Milestones of success	
	Expect to see	Would love to see
Shepherd a culture of curiosity and appetite for learning guided by MERL within EJP, our partners and the wider field	**S&I team** Collecting evidence on EJP's defined learning agenda[3] **EJP** Regular participation in team-wide learning and reflection moments **EJP** POs and IPs budgeting and allocating resources for MERL within individual grants and investments and at the portfolio level **Grantees/investees** Prioritization (via resourcing & time) of MERL in their work	**EJP** Staff members increasingly identifying learning priorities/questions and are able to elaborate strategies to tackle them
Ensure the collective work of EJP's strategy adds up to more than sum of its parts	**EJP's strategy** is evidence-based[4], risky, political and implementable with MERL built in from the start **S&I team** acts as learning and accountability partner across units and teams **S&I team** regularly identifying and analyzing cross-cutting evidence, outcomes, and other information	**1 or more of EJP's cross-cutting priority areas** is focus of a partnership with other parts of the OSF network **EJP portfolios** collaborate on grants, investments, and/or projects outside of narrow portfolio aims in service of thematic priorities

Strategy & Impact Unit priorities, services, and activities

The EJP team's demand for support on MERL has increased considerably in the past years and will likely continue to expand with the new strategic cycle. With that in mind, we decided it would be important to establish a system that could help us prioritize our support to the EJP team with transparency and clarity, together with the key services and activities we aim to provide the team.

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[3] A learning agenda is a defined set of key questions that, when answered, can optimize impact and effectiveness as a program.

[4] By "evidence-based," we mean that our strategic choices are supported and informed by evidence that maximizes and balances both rigor and range of voices/perspectives. EJP understands "evidence" to constitute a wide umbrella of both *tacit* and *explicit* knowledge and actively recognizes that harsher interpretations of this word (i.e. only academic literature) often exclude key voices and perspectives and are in their applicability to practitioners and policy-makers. Even still, we recognize that within this wide umbrella method, the varying rigor of evidence collection means we have different ways of interpreting and applying individual pieces of evidence.

Main services and activities

The S&I team strategy requires providing the EJP team with services that enable colleagues to generate and reflect on evidence and develop activities that support learning as a natural part of their practices. Here we provide a general overview of the main activities and services we expect will be developed with EJP colleagues throughout the strategy period (although new ones might emerge with time).

Annual Review, Reflect and Adapt Workshops [Tier 1, 2, 3]

Each year, EJP portfolio teams and sub-strategies will undergo a light-touch process to **REVIEW** decisions taken, outcomes (expected and unexpected, positive and negative), learning, and any key changes to context or the operating environment impacting this area of work; **REFLECT** on the relevant strategy, goals, and objectives; and **ADAPT** the strategy for the following year based on these insights. Because we have a large team and our streams of work have different annual cycles, we plan to host the investment team RRA in April, Caterpillars & sub-strategies RRA in June/July, and Butterfly RRA in November.

Evaluation & research advice [all tiers]

The S&I team aims to work as a direct source of guidance to EJP in identifying, shaping, overseeing, and using evaluation and research findings in our programming practices. Our vision is that evaluation and research advice is more than a service provided to EJP, but works in collaboration with EJP to strengthen our MERL culture and further develop MERL capacity within the team. Firmly based on our guiding principles, we aim to support team members in taking the lead in evaluation and research processes through:

    A. Coaching and mentoring;

    B. Technical advice, with more hands-on support;

    C. Orientation and support to engage with external contractors;

Decisions regarding the level and type of support provided should be made based on EJP priorities, an open dialogue with team members on capacity and availability, and strategic relevance.

Caterpillar/emerging portfolio support [tiers 3 and 4]

Our caterpillar portfolios have theories of change that are provisional because our confidence in our assumptions is weak and the impacts and outcomes we specify at this stage are more open-ended. Moreover, we are likely to have an inadequate sense of the major actors, detailed inputs, actions, and outputs, as well as the relationships among them. To help leads develop and

mature these portfolios, the S&I team will engage them and assist: in formulating questions, designing approaches to answering these questions, and turning answers into insights for refining strategies over the coming months and years.

Outcome & research data analysis [all tiers]

The S&I team will equip EJP portfolio teams with summaries and analysis of progress toward their portfolios' outcomes regularly, to help inform the portfolio teams' funding decisions. The data for this analysis will be sourced from EJP's Dream Platform, which stores, aggregates, and synthesizes disparate pieces of information collected by EJP from grantees/investees/partners (e.g. in grant reports), third parties (e.g. public indices), or EJP staff (e.g. eligibility assessments and operational data). The S&I team will also support EJP to put user-friendly practices in place around data collection and management and use Dream Platform to learn from results data in real-time. The overarching purpose of this service to EJP will be to allow portfolio teams to efficiently understand where, when, and how their grantees/investees/etc. are progressing toward project/organizational goals, and how this accumulates to progress toward their own portfolio goals. This will help portfolio teams to make strategic, data-driven funding decisions to most effectively achieve their goals and further EJP's mission and impact.

Strategy design & adaptation guidance [all tiers]

The S&I team will continue to work with portfolios, units, and EJP working groups to guide questions around strategy design, implementation, and adaptation. In addition to leading annual Review, Reflect, and Adapt workshops, we will be available to consult with colleagues contemplating larger changes to their strategies, and when possible, even provide advice and guidance on strategic fit and alignment of individual grants and investments.