Raising the Bar

Monitoring & Evaluation Requirements of Peacebuilding Funders

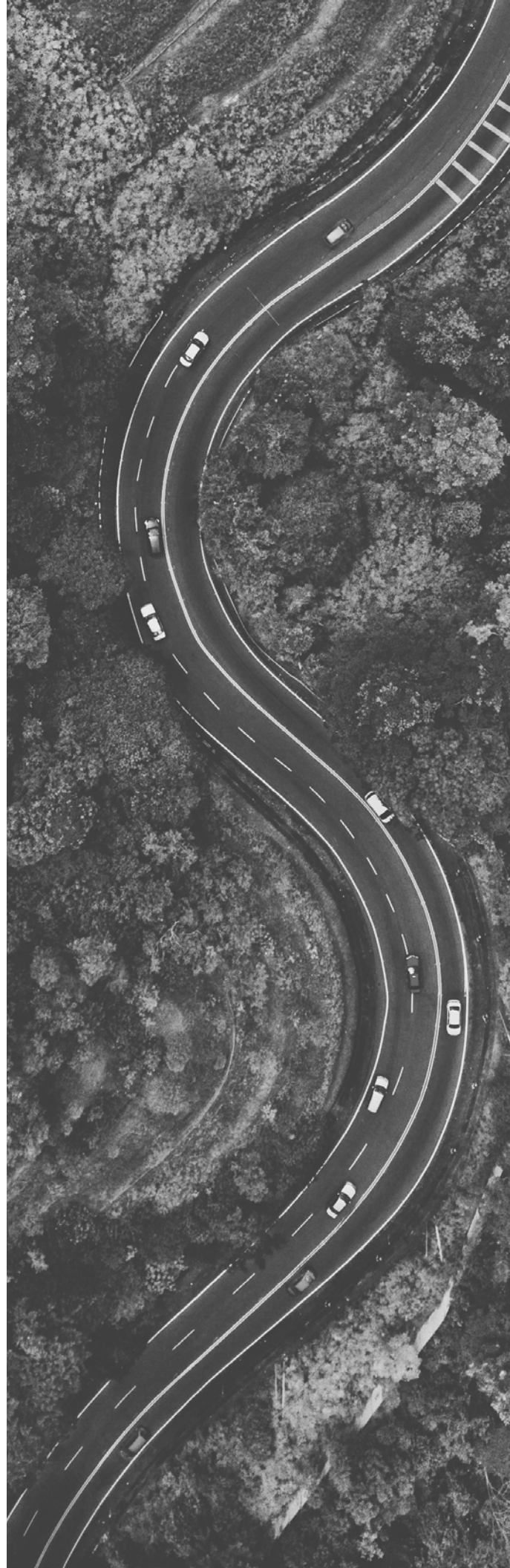Prepared by Rebecca Herrington of Headlight Consulting Services, LLP
For The Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium

PEACEBUILDING EVALUATION CONSORTIUM

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Acknowledgements

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Purpose of the Study

The Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium has made progress over the past four years in generating greater unity between donors and implementers regarding the parameters of effective peacebuilding evaluation. Now that practitioners and policymakers are beginning to embrace and develop greater capacity in a far wider range of design, monitoring, evaluation, and learning (DMEL) tools and methodologies, the next challenge for the peacebuilding evaluation field is to foster a more rigorous culture of monitoring and evaluation from both the implementer and practitioner side and the donor and policymaker side.

A crucial element of this work is collaboration with policymakers and private donors, who can use their influence to encourage stronger DMEL practice through their requirements for peacebuilding programming, starting at the proposal stage. Currently, peacebuilding funders (government and private foundations) have varying DMEL requirements, expectations, and internal capacity related to their proposal and grant management processes. This study provides a high-level analysis on DMEL requirements across funding types to assess similarities, differences, and best practices. Initial recommendations, based on the findings, are provided for peacebuilding funders to strengthen support for more effective peacebuilding DMEL. The Alliance for Peacebuilding is soliciting feedback and prioritization of the recommendations for a future donor convening in Washington, DC to discuss comments, clarifications, edits, and potential adoption.

Methods

This study uses robust document review of applications, policies, guidance, and other available funder documentation from 20 donors, in addition to purposive key informant interviews with implementing partners and donors. Donor selection was 50% government-associated (including multilaterals) and 50% foundations, with 45% from the United States, 30% from European countries, and 25% representing global or local funders. Ten interviewees were selected based on exposure to a multitude of donors or holding unique funding positions in the peacebuilding field. Analysis was conducted in Dedoose and focused on the presence, quality, and support provided around DMEL requirements.

This study acknowledges limitation in scope and comprehensiveness. It is not intended to provide a database of all funders and all requirements, but rather focuses on identifying commonplace policies across main funder categories and highlighting best practice. The very small number of KIIs is not meant to assess funder – implementing partner relationships around DMEL requirements, but rather provide some nuance concerning how DMEL requirements are implemented and enforced and highlight gaps in capacity or communications between groups.

Defining Standards

Substandard: Substandard DMEL policies, guidance, and requirements are those not aligned with established, publicly available best practice DMEL guidance (ex: guidance from The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's, Development Assistance Committee). Substandard also indicates there are significant gaps and/or very minimal DMEL content. Additionally, substandard typically means Do No Harm principles were not clearly incorporated.

Meets Standards: Meets standards refers to DMEL policies, guidance, and requirements that are aligned and follow established, publicly available best practice DMEL guidance. Meets standards indicates the information provided encapsulates what is necessary and sufficient, but does not go beyond into innovative or emerging practices and lacks a systematic or fully integrated approach.

Exceeds Standards: Exceeds standards refers to DMEL policies, guidance, and requirements that are aligned with established, publicly available best practice DMEL guidance, as well as incorporating innovative approaches and promising emergent practices. Exceeds standards also indicates integrated, systematic, fully contextually aware, and iterative DMEL practices where the expectation is that data ownership is shared across program and technical staff from the local level up to the funder.

Rigor: Rigor, for the purpose of this report, refers to DMEL conducted according to standards appropriate to context, limitations, and intended use of the data. Rigorous DMEL must be valid, reliable, and objective in both the process and results. Rigorous methods include quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods approaches that are fit-for-purpose and applied systematically.

Data points: Data points are unique, identifiable information in the data that was collected. Multiple occurrences of the same information within an interview or source material are condensed to represent one data point. This helps to ensure a particular point or finding is not over-represented.

Included Funders

PRIVATE

Carnegie Corporation of New York, GHR Foundation, Humanity United, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, One Earth Foundation, Peace Direct, Peace Nexus Fund, Peace Support Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH, Wellspring

GOVERNMENT - ASSOCIATED

Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Global Resilience Partnership, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, United Kingdom's Department for International Development, United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, United States Agency for International Development, United States Embassy Ghana, United States Institute of Peace, United States State Department, World Bank

Findings and Conclusions

Balancing Support and Structure

This study looked across the DMEL spectrum, defining standards based on existing best practice that valued technical rigor, contextualization, and utilization-focused practices. **Across funder types, 50% of funder requirements were sub-standard.** There is slightly more maturity in program design, but nearly thirty years after the accountability push in international development, peacebuilding is still struggling to find its footing in data-driven decision making that creates strong, responsive programs, tracks progress, adapts, assesses impact, and shares evidence with the field.

DMEL Standards Across Funder Type

Legend: Substandard | Meets Standards | Exceeds Standards
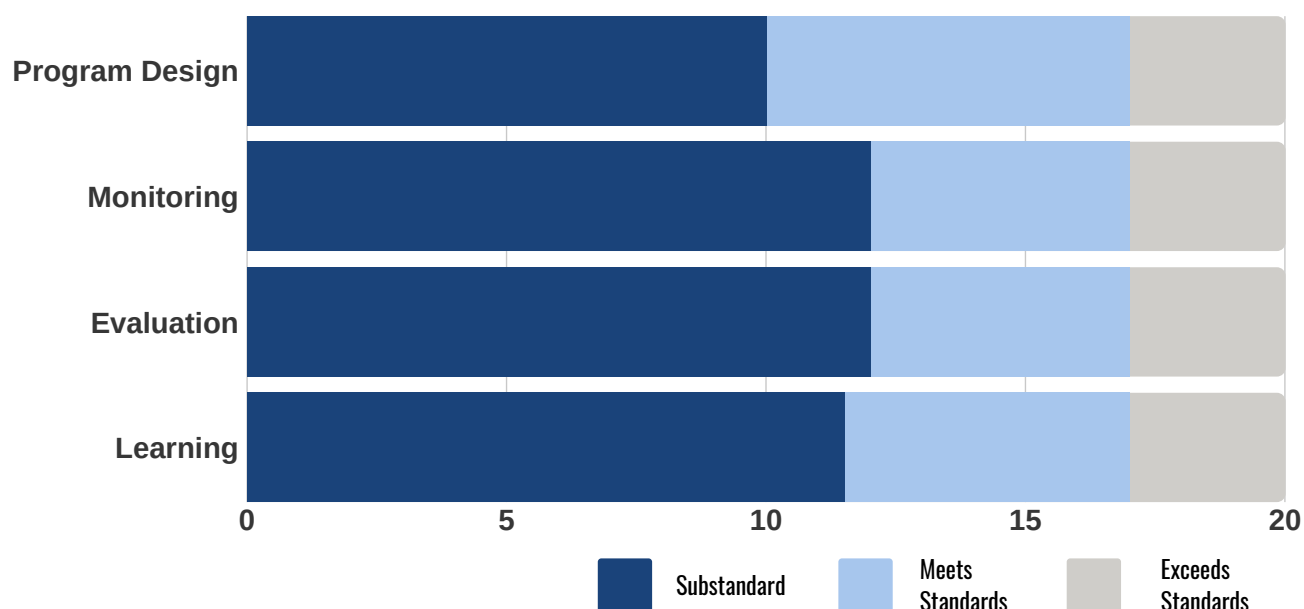
Learning from Best Practice

While 50% of requirements were substandard, bright spots were present as well. The data highlighted the following best practices and essential challenges to overcome that must be addressed in order to improve DMEL in peacebuilding:

- Recognizing a mindset/culture shift is required (7 data points, emphasized slightly more by foundations). 7 additional data points across funder type stated that culture must include a willingness to learn from failure;
- Ensuring equitable access to data and ownership of information by the implementing partners came up as both a best practice (5 data points) and a challenge (7 data points) to effective DMEL. Analysis emphasized that data ownership is essential to valuing DMEL, data use, and adaptive management. Analysis also highlighted that data access and ownership is not just about access to a database, but necessitates strong guidance and support for responsible data requirements and improved transparency around why various information is required;

- Prioritizing DMEL at all levels. Government funders (6) expressed that DMEL must be prioritized at a leadership, organizational, and externally-facing level, including in how M&E is budgeted;
- Centering all DMEL requirements around active, transparent use, focusing on what would be a primary benefit to improved programming; and,
- Addressing inadequate timelines. All donors must work to adjust insufficient timelines (9 data points across funder type) for DMEL to be accurately designed and to measure peacebuilding programming impacts.

Beyond best practice, the analysis identified the subsequent gaps and opportunities for growth in DMEL.

Lack of Capacity

Improving DMEL in peacebuilding is a community effort, and while this study looked exclusively at donor requirements and policies, there is a clear gap in implementer DMEL capacity with 11 data points across funder types and KIIs. If the field wants stronger, more responsive programs, data-driven decision making, and clear capture of impact, donors and implementers will need to meet in the middle. *Implementers may find the Guiding Steps for Peacebuilding Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation, the Online Field Guide to Peacebuilding Evaluation, and other materials developed by the Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium and on DME for Peace beneficial in enhancing their DMEL capacity.

Inaccessible Policies

The expansiveness of bilateral funding and accountability mechanisms results in comprehensive policies. 60% of government funders had complex, lengthy DMEL associated policies.

Best Practice Spotlight

One of the funders included in this study takes a fully integrated approach to ensure monitoring and evaluation is leveraged for data-driven decision making in program design, assessing impact, and making funding decisions. The funder brings implementers and technical staff together to break down, contextualize, and apply findings from evaluations through interactive workshops called Placement Parties. This funder has also democratized access to data with a wiki-based platform that enables all partners in programming to take ownership over information. Lastly, their model emphasizes learning from failure in order to solidify programming, scale, then graduate.

While comprehensive, these policies are often mired in legal and agency-specific language in response to various political pressures. This makes DMEL policies difficult to access and digest for smaller and local partners, biasing funding towards those with existing knowledge or capacity and making the policies harder to implement across all implementing partners. A few policies do adequately capture DMEL best practices, but the information is buried, and implementers would have to already know what they were looking for to leverage the provided guidance.

Designing Without Complexity in Mind

60% of government donors are meeting program design standards. This is in large part to established rhetoric and theory of change requirements but leaves room for growth. In particular, government donors are not regularly incorporating systems thinking or other more holistic approaches to program design, which is necessary in the complex and fragile environments in which peacebuilding programs operate.

Locally-led Without Support

An emphasis on participatory, locally-led development can be advantageous; however, many foundations taking this approach are not leveraging program design best practice to support local implementers in their efforts. Over 70% of foundations had significantly substandard program design requirements. This issue is worsened by a lack of appropriate guidance to implementers across the DMEL spectrum (see chart below). This can lead to programming that is not always logically sound, that is too aspirational regarding its intended impact, and is not based on existing evidence.

DMEL Guidance Provided to Implementers

Legend: Government (dark blue), Foundation (light blue)
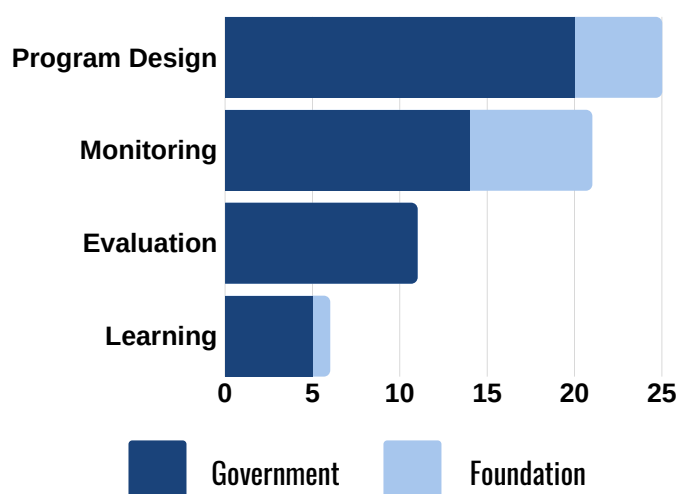
Inadequate Monitoring

80% of foundations are not leveraging useful monitoring practices, requiring either no monitoring at all or only anecdotal or basic output metrics. Government donors are meeting standards around performance monitoring most of the time, but are failing to appropriately leverage context monitoring, and monitoring data for adaptive management.

Inadequate monitoring contributes to misunderstandings and poor judgements regarding the utility of DMEL and is a waste of resources for all involved. Inadequate monitoring often includes performance metrics that are too output focused and do not look at implementation quality, context, and progress towards outcomes. This type of monitoring approach requires significant data collection efforts by the partner without providing the intended benefit of data-driven program management and course correction.

Misperceptions Between Funders and Implementers

Implementers do not know how to appropriately package their work, adaptive actions, and results to funders. This was emphasized across 6 data points expressing concern that implementers do not actively fix programming problems and/or cannot appropriately leverage data for adaptive management. Funders in turn, are not as hands on as they should be if they want to establish trust and know how a program is progressing. This creates opportunities for miscommunication on both sides, leaving some funders with the perception that implementers do not identify and fix problems when they arise over the course of implementation.

Evaluation Nowhere to be Found

Evaluation was often not even discussed in the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) sections of applications, and when present, it was just a requirement to do an evaluation with no guidance or rationale. 90% of foundations had substandard evaluation requirements, policies, and/or guidance.

Government associated funders had a 50/50 split on those who met standards and those below evaluation standards, with two funders providing bright spot evaluation guidance that exceeds current standards. This absence of evaluation requirements and guidance leads to wasted resources on inaccurate assessments of performance and impact, and data is left on the shelf. However, rigorous qualitative methods, like outcome harvesting and process tracing among others, offer a bright spot for evaluation methods (highlighted in 6 data points and more strongly emphasized by government funders) that are particularly well-suited for the complexity of peacebuilding programming. Mixed methods approaches should also be considered. Rigorous evaluations should always leverage fit-for-purpose methods that are applied systematically, with sufficient implementation and data quality checks.

Recommendations

Replicating what works

Based on the findings and conclusions, this study recommends funders take the following actions to support stronger DMEL practice for more effective peacebuilding programming:

- **Funders need to prioritize improved DMEL practice if they want stronger peacebuilding programming.** There are a lot of entry points to start this work, and this study recommends funders start by strengthening program design requirements and support. Leveraging better theories of changes, systems understanding, stakeholder maps, etc. will enable better data collection and contextual understanding for improved use of data coming in from monitoring. Whole of field improvements may require funders to provide structured funds to build capacity through trainings, hiring DMEL staff, and organizational change management support, in addition to hands-on assistance during proposal development and program implementation. Most importantly, funders need to demonstrate leadership in this culture shift through visible support for learning through failure and stronger prioritization of DMEL from leadership down to partner points of contact in the field. An ideal starting point is better transparency around information requests and how reporting information is used, a practice that should be echoed back by implementers.

- **DMEL Policies need to be translated into bite-sized guidance notes and templates that provide support to anyone engaging with the funder**. While comprehensive policies are necessary for government funders, they are not utilization-focused for most partners. This study recommends governmental funders mimic the UKAID Guidance Notes examples, ensure any developed guidance notes are readily accessible and known as essential reading for all applicants, as well as provide more hands-on support to small and local partners to help them respond to the policies effectively.

- **All donors should better integrate DMEL into program design to ensure logically sound, evidence-driven programming that is properly contextualized for sensitivity and long-term sustainability.** This means enhancing systems thinking questions, Do No Harm expectations, and program design leveraging conflict analyses for all peacebuilding programming requests for proposals. Government donors should review the State Department DRL Proposal Guidance for examples of integrated DMEL requirements.

- **Foundations should better utilize existing best practice, bringing the core aspects of theory of change and conflict sensitivity checks into program design when taking a locally-led approach**. This may require making technical and Western concepts more contextualized, digestible, and accessible to local partners. For example, this requires going beyond asking about definitions of success to providing detailed descriptions of outcomes, how they are developed, and why they are important. Simplified questions may reduce the information burden on applicants, but drastically weaken program design. Foundations should also increase hands-on support to local organizations, enabling local organizations more ownership over DMEL and the ability to use data for evolution of their programming, not merely as a funder reporting requirement.

- **All funders should require monitoring, enhancing any existing requirements to incorporate a systems lens and utilization-focus.** This will ensure monitoring efforts are worth the investment in time and money for both funders and implementers. Funders should pay special attention to build in Do No Harm, contextual, and implementation quality indicators. Indicators should be balanced (not just adding to reporting burdens) and all data collected should have a clear value-add, which is transparent to all stakeholders.

- **Leveraging data, communicating effectively, and adaptive management should be included in any implementer capacity building efforts.**
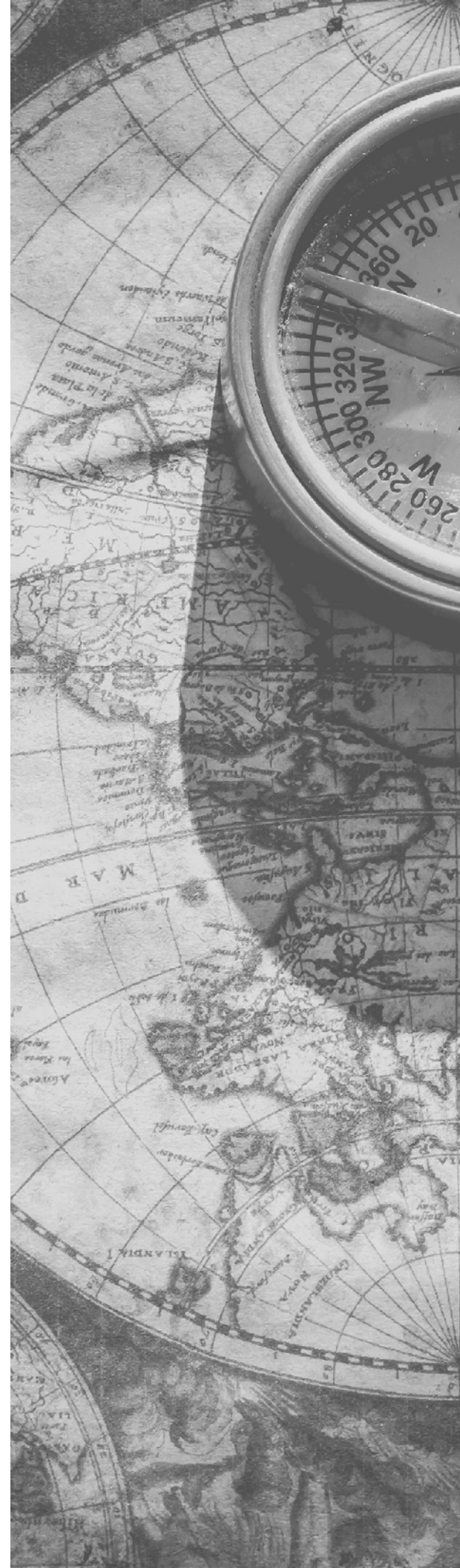
- (Continued from previous page) Funders need to be more engaged with implementers and know what is happening on the ground, in particular with decision making and how data is being used in program management. This can be done through more detailed, regular check-in calls and not relying solely on quarterly reports. Funders should also enhance learning requirements in reporting asking implementers to better capture changes and shifts in a data-driven way. Both these efforts will require additional resources, the first in funder level of effort (time) engaging with implementers; the second in time and possibly funding for implementers to enhance and better integrate learning efforts.

- **Lastly, funders need to strengthen their understanding and guidance provided around evaluation.** This should not be done through evaluation policies that merely encourage evaluations and their use, but more prescriptive guidance around which evaluation methods are appropriate for various types of questions and information needs, providing additional resource links on how to conduct those types of evaluations. If agreed upon, this could be a communal resource across funders in peacebuilding, minimizing resources needed to complete such a tool and providing some standardization to peacebuilding evaluations that could then contribute to meta-analyses and a better understanding of the state of the field.

Next Steps

On behalf of the Peacebuilding Evaluation Consortium, thank you for engaging with this study. We hope this highlights the successes and opportunities for funders and implementers to come together through DMEL and continually strengthen peacebuilding. Additional findings, best practice examples, and more detailed recommendations are available on request. The Alliance for Peacebuilding would like to solicit your feedback on the content of this study, in particular the feasibility and potential next steps for implementing the recommendations. Which recommendations would you prioritize? Which recommendations would be easier to implement as a team effort or would benefit from external support? Alliance for Peacebuilding is planning a donor convening for the end of 2019 to discuss these recommendations more in-depth and identify possible action plans.

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