Using Contextually Relevant MEL Approaches to Strengthen Educational Programming and Organizational Systems

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Gender has long been recognized as a critical element in creating a more equitable education landscape. For many years, the focus on girls in education was on ensuring parity in educational access and attendance. While great strides have been made in education rates for girls, especially in primary education, these advances have not been even across (or even within) countries, and other indicators of quality education remain a concern for girls (UNICEF, 2022). Ensuring that girls have access to safe school environments, are supported in their schooling and career choices, and are seen as a valuable part of their community are all needed to leverage education toward a more equitable world (UNICEF, 2022).

Many organizations are working to improve access to quality girls' education around the world, and local and international NGO organizations are crucial to making this happen. These efforts often emerge out of small-scale efforts to address a particular need. As organizations grow, a more detailed and systematized approach is often required to ensure that the process of educational improvement is consistently effective and contextually relevant. This paper examines the work of Girl Rising to systematically build its impact on girls' education around the world.

Girl Rising works in 8 countries around the world to create space and opportunity for girls to *learn, thrive, and rise* by engaging with teachers and students to recognize the importance of girls' education and to support girls' dreams. Girl Rising does this by working with NGO partners to give partner schools access to quality educational content on gender and socio-emotional learning (SEL), which is built on the foundations of a storytelling approach. The stories of local and international changemakers inspire leadership and attitudinal change in adolescent girls and boys and their educators. In the seven years that Girl Rising has been running the program, they have witnessed and learned from the perseverance and engagement of the local partner organizations. Their feedback has helped Girl Rising deepen its approach to addressing gender in classrooms, add content on mental health and wellbeing to the SEL curriculum, and leverage local networks to build on existing knowledge, resources, and best practices.

This paper examines the process of developing and using a monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) framework to build and improve learning opportunities that a) increase awareness of the importance of girls' education, b) encourage girls and boys to dream big for themselves and their communities, and c) supports girls and boys in achieving their aspirations. Through the paper, we will explore the impact this process has had on the organization, the creation and implementation of a MEL framework that reflects the unique storytelling approach of the Girl Rising program, and how findings influence ongoing programming and organizational decision-making. The development of the MEL framework occurred against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant constant reevaluation of the programming approaches and priorities on multiple levels within the organization.

1. The first part of the paper will explore the growth of the Girl Rising program and how the need for a systematized monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) approach has become clearer.

From the onset of the Girl Rising program, stakeholders have seen how the organization's work has influenced students, teachers, and communities and this has been captured in independently run, localized external evaluations. In 2019, Girl Rising began exploring ways to put a MEL framework into place that could capture the changes that were happening in the schools and amongst the students and teachers where the Girl Rising curriculum was being implemented, to identify best practices in fostering quality girls' education and empowerment, and to strengthen the Girl Rising curriculum and program implementation. External research experts joined the Girl Rising team in 2020 to develop and pilot the MEL framework.

2. The second part of the paper will discuss the process of developing a MEL framework that is responsive to the needs of a growing organization, reflects the unique narrative/storytelling focus of Girl Rising, works closely with Girl Rising and its community-based partners, and creates structure around data collection while recognizing the need to be contextually relevant and flexible in the face of a global pandemic.

3. The third part of the paper will highlight key findings from the initial round of MEL framework implementation, and how those findings are influencing Girl Rising at the programming and organizational development level.

This paper illuminates how the process of advancing education through a systematized MEL framework fosters organizational growth and contributes to high-quality, culturally relevant programming. The paper will provide insights to other organizations as they scale up to multiple country contexts and respond to rapidly changing contexts, whether that be a global pandemic or other, more locally based, challenges.

Part 1 - Using Storytelling to Support Girls and Girls' Education

Girl Rising is a global non-profit whose mission is to use the power of storytelling to change the way the world values girls and their education. Through original content, curricula, and programs, it addresses gender norms, builds confidence and agency in girls, and supports partner organizations in their girls' education and gender norm change work.

Girl Rising has unique roots, however. It began as a film production company in 2010 when a group of filmmakers and journalists came together to make a film and impact campaign on the power of educating girls to end poverty. The film, *Girl Rising*, featured nine ordinary yet extraordinary girls and their challenging paths to securing an education. The success of the film and global social action campaign led to investments from a combination of corporate partners and USAID to fund its first country-specific programs, which included communications campaigns, specific influencer advocacy strategies, and partnerships with local organizations, including education, gender, and health-focused organizations.

This paper explores Girl Rising's efforts to address the need for a cohesive MEL system to achieve a deeper understanding of its to-date promising, yet not contextualized, results and to better inform Girl Rising's program design, delivery, monitoring, measurement, and impact evaluation. This MEL framework also provides the opportunity to help build the body of evidence on effective strategies to work with adolescents and improve learning environments for girls.

The development, testing, and finalization of the MEL framework over three years helped strengthen Girl Rising's community-level program delivery and monitoring models and demonstrate effectiveness at the youth, teacher, and organization level, adding to the body of evidence and knowledge on how this type of programming can effectively advance girls' education. The organization saw this as critical to increasing the long-term impact of Girl Rising's work, honing the tools and implementation model for others to use in the future, and informing and aiding other stakeholder interventions so that ultimately girls' are supported, educated, and allowed to thrive.

Part 2: Narrative evaluation: Creating a contextually relevant global MEL framework

In 2020, Girl Rising partnered with external MEL experts at Miske Witt and Associates International (MWAI) to develop a monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) framework that is responsive to the needs of a growing organization, reflects the unique narrative/storytelling focus of Girl Rising, works closely with Girl Rising and its community-based partners, and creates structure around data collection. Each of these points was critical to ensuring the success of the MEL framework. This paper illuminates the importance of working with organizational staff and board members to develop clear and defined outcomes for the organization overall and for the project specifically. Considering Girl Rising's expanding projects and activities in different contexts and with different purposes, the first task was to work with key personnel to identify an organizational Theory of Change to ensure program outcomes aligned with overall organizational goals.

Once organizational goals were in place, the MWAI team worked closely with Girl Rising staff to create a framework that reflected the features of the program, namely close collaboration with locally based community partners and a narrative or storytelling focus. The importance of context in evaluation and research projects is not a new concept, however, the challenge lay in creating a structure for data collection that could be implemented globally yet remain context-relevant. By working closely with community-based partners and Girl Rising staff, the MEL experts were able to incorporate several features of the MEL framework that attended to this balance.

Equally important was the desire to incorporate narrative features to make a robust MEL framework that reflected Girl Rising's use of storytelling and the value of student and teacher voices in their programming. The pressures organizations face to present their work to funders or other stakeholders can shape the way knowledge is collected, analyzed, and shared through monitoring and evaluation. The incorporation of narrative techniques allows for a robust way to gather MEL data (van Wessel, 2018). In this paper, we demonstrate how narrative techniques, in combination with traditional M&E tools, open up access to data that demonstrates the extent to which programming is achieving its desired outcomes, provides suggestions for ongoing programming, and gives voice to students, teachers, and parents impacted by Girl Rising's work.

Part 3: Moving Girls's education Forward: Using data to inform program implementation; How the findings from implementing the MEL framework in three countries (Pakistan, Kenya, and India) inform Girl Rising's program implementation

Girl Rising's (GR) MEL framework is designed to measure a set of immediate outcomes for students and teachers after participation in structured curriculum programming on gender and socio-emotional learning in formal and non-formal educational settings. The process of creating and implementing the MEL framework has allowed Girl Rising to intentionally focus their work on key outcomes across program areas. The impacts on Girl Rising and its partners can be seen in three distinct ways 1) During the creation of the MEL framework, Girl Rising staff and implementation partners worked closely to develop agreed-upon outcomes; 2) As initial findings became available, new insights and recommendations for implementation emerged and 3) Throughout the process partner organizations benefited from training on the purpose and use of the MEL tools.

During the early stages of MEL development, Girl Rising board members, staff, and implementation partners closely examined the most important aspects of the various facets of Girl Rising programming for the overall organization and in each specific country context. The process created dialogue and resulted in the identification of key outcomes for the programming. Further, it created space for partner organizations to develop ownership of the project.

Initial findings demonstrated that students' and teachers' beliefs were beginning to change about girls' education, and both girls and boys demonstrated that they were able to dream and make plans for their dreams in ways they previously had not. At the same time, areas for program improvement were also identified. For instance, teachers still struggle with knowing how to define gender, which is resulting in changes to how teacher training will take place. While student and teacher learning was evident, it was also clear that meaningful and consistent parent engagement was needed. As a result, new parent programming was developed and is being implemented for the first time in the form of a structured program at Girl Rising.

Finally, the implementation of the MEL framework greatly helped local partner organizations to reflect on their internal MEL capacity and identify gaps for building greater expertise and standardized MEL systems. Their staff demonstrated improvements in their understanding of measuring social change, developing tools of measurement, and documenting data. For example, one of Girl Rising's partner organizations, Big Picture Learning Kenya, has started to incorporate their learnings from the implementation of the MEL framework into other ongoing educational programs to capture the change their programs bring to the local communities they work with. Girl Rising will measure this change more methodically by developing outcome indicators that capture the changes it expects to see in its partner organizations through their work with Girl Rising.