

Working Paper

# **Lessons learned from K4D learning journeys: A practical approach for supporting learning in development organisations**

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## About this working paper

This paper is a reflection on lessons learned by the Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development (K4D) Programme's Learning Journey process in supporting learning for the UK Government (initially the Department for International Development, subsequently the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) over the course of the programme from 2016 to 2022.

K4D services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations working in international development, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with the Education Development Trust, Itad, University of Leeds Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), University of Birmingham International Development Department (IDD) and the University of Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI).

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The content of this paper does not necessarily represent the opinions of any of the individuals consulted.

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# Contents

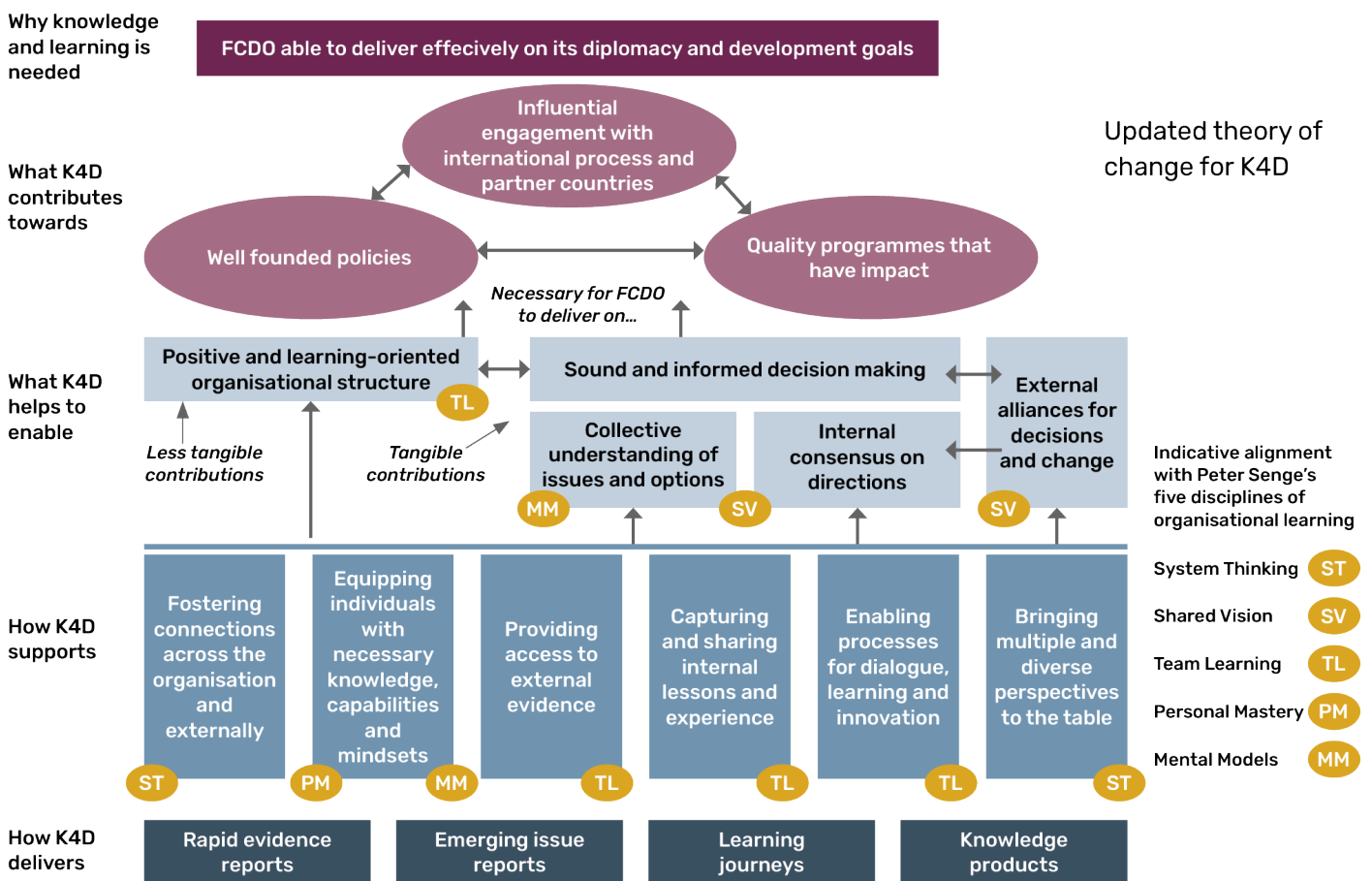
Executive summary	1
<b>1</b> Introduction	4
1.1 Background to the K4D Programme	4
1.2 The Learning Journey Model	5
1.3 Approach and methodology	5
<b>2</b> Insights from Organisational Learning literature	8
<b>3</b> A conceptual framework for K4Ds Contribution to Organisational Learning in FCDO	10
<b>4</b> Assessment of learning processes facilitated by Learning Journeys	12
4.1 General assessment of K4D Learning Journeys	12
4.2 Fostering connections	14
4.3 Equipping individuals with necessary knowledge capabilities and mindsets	15
4.4 Providing access to external evidence	15
4.5 Capturing and sharing internal lessons and experience	16
4.6 Enabling processes for dialogue, learning and innovation	16
4.7 Bringing multiple and diverse perspectives to the table	17
<b>5</b> From learning processes to decision-making outcomes	19
5.1 From supporting learning to enabling intermediate outcomes	19
5.2 Collective understanding of issues and internal consensus on direction	19
5.3 Sound and informed decision-making	21
5.4 How learning journeys contribute to higher-level outcomes	22
<b>6</b> Final reflections	23
References	25
Annex: Learning Journey Topic categories	26

# Executive summary

The Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development (K4D) Programme, which started in 2016, came to an end in September 2022. This K4D working paper reflects on the learning processes and approaches facilitated by this programme, through 'learning journeys' conducted in collaboration with staff of the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in the United Kingdom. A total of 45 learning journeys took place, of which 33 have been assessed for this working paper. Through this assessment, we test our proposed Theory of Change for organisational learning (OL) in the context of international development agencies.

Figure 1 illustrates this conceptualisation. The framework suggests that a primary focus for knowledge and learning support should be on creating the conditions for sound and informed decision making ('How K4D supports'). This in turn enables a positive organisational culture which is learning oriented ('What K4D helps to enable'). Our findings show that there is evidence that K4D learning journeys have contributed to sound, informed decision-making through enabling collective understanding of issues and options, and through building internal consensus on directions.

**Figure 1. How K4D learning and evidence services contribute to organisational learning and decision making within FCDO**



Source: Authors' own

Facilitated learning spaces bring together both explicit and tacit forms of knowledge, which contribute to OL by creating an environment in which staff reflect on both experience and external sources of evidence. Such learning processes generate new knowledge and test and adapt to respond to ever changing contexts. The paper shows that effective learning spaces were created within the organisation of FCDO, and the methods used (including online tools for participation) were able to capture and share internal learning, foster internal connections, present external evidence, and enable dialogue with other perspectives. Learning journeys were also effective in engaging other government departments, in particular FCO which later merged with DFID. Most learning journeys engaged only in limited ways with organisations external to UK Government. Further challenges were encountered when staff were redeployed to respond to political (Brexit) or international development (Covid-19; Ukraine) priorities.

## Learning from learning processes

As many learning journeys took a multi-disciplinary approach, understanding linkages between disciplines relies on an exchange of knowledge and experience across specialized groups and departments. The learning journeys that were most successful in building and fostering connections had members of different teams, cadres, and organisations present within the core organizing team from the outset. Connections were easier to make when a learning journey was organised in the build up to a special event, conference, or summit. Importantly, knowledge generated through connections, such as lessons learned and experience, could be captured and stored throughout the learning journeys. This made learning journeys of great interest, for new as well as existing networks, and communities of practice. However, in some cases, time constraints reduced the innovative pedagogic ambition.

One of the main objectives of learning journeys was to equip individuals with necessary mindsets and knowledge capabilities. Strengthening capabilities was often targeted at specific tasks, such as country diagnostics, developing a Theory of Change, and specific service delivery challenges. However, it was not possible to directly address all FCDO capability needs; the facilitated learning approach required scoping out participants' needs and

prioritising carefully with them from the outset. To extend their reach, learning journeys made evidence accessible in various ways, such as guidance notes, infographics, policy briefs, and briefing packs for diplomats. Time and safe spaces were established for peers and often with invited external experts, to discuss the evidence and how to apply it to FCDO policy and programmes.

## From learning processes to outcomes

The goal of the learning processes was to contribute to sound and informed decision making, through creating internal consensus on direction, and improving collective understanding of issues and options. Many participants appreciated how they were able to make links between theory and practice during the process. They valued learning journeys for bridging gaps in internal knowledge, and in some cases, enabling participants to open up from a technical to a political conversation. Good decision-making is underpinned by having confidence in the appropriate evidence, and time to deliberate on it in safe spaces (internally or with external experts), which the learning journeys provided.

However, causality in the contribution of K4D learning journeys to shifting policies, or changes in development programmes and strategies, is far more challenging to identify. Monitoring and evaluation processes struggle to capture such evidence, particularly as K4D learning journeys are one of many other learning and political processes that impact on programme, partnership, and policy outcomes at FCDO. Higher-level, more political outcomes are outside the direct sphere of influence of an evidence and learning programme, such as K4D.

## Lessons learned

There are several lessons from K4D learning journeys for organisational learning (OL) practices. There needs to be recognition of how learning inputs and processes make indirect, as well as direct, contributions to outcomes, and acknowledgement of the intangible nature of some aspects of a positive and learning-oriented organisational culture. Learning should be linked to practice and should inform ongoing activities, business planning, and implementation decision-making (i.e. adaptive

management). Furthermore, investment in OL requires not only provision of knowledge, but also enabling the interconnection between individual learning, internal OL and learning with external partners and stakeholders. Central in this regard is the creation, strengthening and resourcing of spaces in which staff can come together to reflect on practice, discuss evidence, question or identify problems, and co-create potential solutions.

A consortia approach has provided FCDO with a breadth and depth of expertise across its thematic priorities, with an ability to draw in researchers and thematic leads across leading academic

institutions. Flexibility is key for responding to the changing needs of the organisation, and for reshaping a learning journey at key moments. Knowledge providers need to invest in facilitation capabilities and knowledge brokering skills for their researchers involved in learning journeys. Leadership support within the learning organisation is critical for the legitimacy of the K4D programme and for ensuring active engagement of staff. This leadership needs to encourage and enable staff to engage; leading by example by joining the learning journeys themselves, as well as advertising and communicating learning opportunities across the organisation.

## Key messages

- > **Recognise the multi-dimensional nature of organisational learning.**
- > **Invest in quality learning processes.**
- > **Value the intangible aspects of creating a culture of organisational learning.**
- > **Organisational learning requires management leadership and commitment.**
- > **Knowledge institutions supporting organisational learning require specific capacities and mindsets for effectively facilitating learning and knowledge brokering.**
- > **Logistical and organisation capacity is crucial.**
- > **Good communication and well-developed knowledge products need to underpin the organisational learning processes.**

# 1 Introduction:

## Organisational learning in the development sector

This Working Paper reflects on the approach taken by the [Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development \(K4D\) Programme](#) to support the take up of evidence and promote learning within the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (initially with the Department for International Development, DFID, which was merged with the FCO in 2020). It is authored by K4D researchers, and its aim is not to evaluate K4D activities in cooperation with FCDO, but to understand the effectiveness of our model to support knowledge and evidence for organisational learning (OL) within FCDO, and across government departments. These lessons are useful for the UK Government, and more widely of value for other governments and donors in the international development community.

Learning is key for delivering effectively in any field, and especially so in the fast-changing and complex arena of international development and diplomacy. In an increasingly fluid and unstable world, development advances are confronted by multiple climate, health, and political crises. Access to timely and relevant learning, evidence, and insight (ICAI 2014) is vital to framing an effective response to tackle global challenges. OL scholarship highlights the need for organisations to create opportunities for their staff to reflect on experience and external sources of evidence, generate new knowledge, test, and adapt to respond to changing contexts (Kolb 1984, Senge 1997, Garvin 1993). Faced with increasingly complex programming and policy challenges, development organisations more than ever need to provide spaces for diverse perspectives, disciplines, departments, and experiences to come together. Through considering different perspectives, we can understand more of the complex picture, and are more likely to avoid bias (Burns & Worsley 2015). Furthermore, to deliver on the global challenge and commitment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its call to 'leave no one behind' requires

learning across teams, cadres, and departments due to their interdisciplinary logic (Baird, Camfield & Ghimire 2021; Wheeler, Shaw & Howard 2020). Supporting learning as an organisational practice, is therefore an essential ingredient of effective development practice in an uncertain and complex world. However, OL in development organisations is insufficiently researched and documented (see Section 2).

### 1.1 Background to the K4D Programme

In 2014, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) published a report on 'How DFID learns', which highlighted the importance of learning for UK aid 'to achieve maximum impact and value for money' (ICAI 2014: 1). ICAI defined learning in this context to mean 'the extent to which DFID uses information and experience to influence its decisions' (ibid). ICAI's overall assessment was that while DFID at the time invested in research, evaluation, and personnel development, it was:

*...less good at using it and building on experience so as to turn learning into action. DFID does not clearly identify how its investment in learning links to its performance and delivering better impact ... Insufficient priority is placed on learning during implementation. The emphasis on results can lead to a bias to the positive. Learning from both success and failure should be systematically encouraged...*

(ibid: 1)

The report also highlighted that DFID staff did not have sufficient time to build learning into their core activities, and as a result the organisation was failing to ensure that lessons were captured and failing to define 'a positive culture of learning'.

ICAI's recommendations centred on the need for 'consistent and continuous organisational learning', synthesised evidence, valuing know-how as well as 'knowledge', sharing of lessons between staff, and decision making based on evidence of what has and has not worked.

In recognition of the need to strengthen OL capacities, and in response to the ICAI report, FCDO/DFID established K4D in 2016, to support the use of learning and evidence to improve the impact of development policy and programmes. Since its inception, K4D has delivered a significant body of knowledge, evidence and learning products and processes. It built on the legacy and learning of previous helpdesk work (see Lucas 2022), and introduced innovative approaches to learning and evidence, including facilitated learning processes, and tailored learning products. The learning about the helpdesk service over the last six years, which has produced over 1200 evidence reviews, is discussed in a separate working paper (ibid). However, in this paper, we focus on the learning approach of the 'learning journey', which has aimed at building the capabilities of FCDO officers working at head office, regional and in-country programme teams. During the timeframe of the K4D programme, 45 learning journeys were conducted in cooperation with FCDO/DFID staff, 33 of which met the criteria for inclusion in this assessment<sup>1</sup>.

## 1.2 The Learning Journey Model

The premise of the K4D learning journey is that learning for good development practice can be enabled when staff have access to quality, balanced evidence syntheses that show what has or has not worked regarding an issue or question, brought into dialogue with the know-how and practical knowledge of colleagues and partners. Such facilitated learning spaces bring together both explicit and tacit forms of knowledge held and commissioned by FCDO and provide an architecture for operational and strategic learning (Yanguas 2021). Learning Journeys entail a personal and organisational investment, requiring staff to commit time to their active participation in the generation of knowledge and learning. This investment is expected to create ownership of the activities and learning objectives by the relevant staff.

Learning Journeys are designed to provide spaces for groups of FCDO (and other government departments) staff to come together in webinar series, action learning sets or communities of practice, and usually across teams, cadres, sectors or departments, to explore a complex issue or question relevant to their work. Learning Journeys have been positively received and demand for them has grown throughout the five-year programme. The lessons learned are likely to be of value for other development organisations needing to maintain their effectiveness in increasingly turbulent and complex contexts.

A typical Learning Journey is requested by the client around a particular theme. It is designed collaboratively with the requester, with the timescale, frequency and modality adjusted to the needs and availability of the cohort, usually running over 3-9 months. It combines expert inputs with internal discussions, allowing FCDO (and other government department) participants to engage with this evidence, share their own knowledge and experience, and identify lessons and actions for policy and practice. It is a collaborative and flexible approach to learning, which can be designed as a series of modules, or a more open adaptive approach that allows for participants to propose themes and activities as the Learning Journey evolves.

## 1.3 Approach and methodology

The K4D team's reflections on the Learning Journey process in the context of OL theory led us to develop a conceptual framework of how the K4D programme and specifically Learning Journeys have contributed to learning in FCDO (see Section 3 below). The methodology for this paper was designed to identify and discuss the evidence for this Theory of Change. While the framework applies to the whole K4D programme, in this paper we have chosen to focus on learning journeys as the mechanism for facilitating the link between individual, group and organisational learning (OL). We sought to gather evidence against each of the six pathways identified in the framework through which K4D supports learning: i) fostering connections across the organisation and externally, ii) equipping

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1. Excluded from selection for this assessment were LJs which focused solely on a single cadre conference or event. Or were not completed due to a change in FCDO priorities and staff capacity to engage.



## Box 1: Case study – K4D Learning Journey on Health Systems Strengthening

### Background and overview

The K4D Learning Journey on Health Systems Strengthening (HSS) aimed to support FCDO's understanding, capacity and influence in strengthening health systems to improve health and well-being amongst the poorest and marginalised in low- and middle-income countries. There were seven learning sessions with a focus on five topics – political economy analysis, strengthening accountability to improve health outcomes, health financing priorities in the time of Covid-19, engaging private health providers in the Covid-19 era, and how global health architecture strengthens country health systems, and two cross-cutting themes – improving quality of care and leaving no-one behind in Universal Health Coverage.

The Learning Journey was designed for FCDO health advisers, advisers with an interest in health, and staff working in the health sector, who wanted to update their knowledge and strengthen their competencies and skills on HSS. Pivoting to all online learning and engagement due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Learning Journey ran from April 2020 to March 2021. Online learning and carefully timed sessions enabled equal access for FCDO and colleagues from around the globe and engagement from a wider range of contributors. There was considerable participation given it was a very busy time due to the Covid-19 pandemic, creation of FCDO and cuts to the UK aid budget.

### How K4D supports and what K4D delivers

A designated K4D Researcher worked closely with a designated FCDO Health Adviser who oversaw the whole Learning Journey. Specific FCDO Advisers (not limited to health) were then identified for each learning session and worked closely with the K4D Researcher to develop and deliver that session. Registered participants were asked to complete a pre-session questionnaire so that the session could be shaped to their needs.

In advance of each session, registered participants received 'essential' resources (max 2 hours provided 2 weeks in advance) to ensure those joining had the necessary background to fully participate. Additional 'optional' resources were provided for further learning. The sessions were designed to provide knowledge and real-world examples relevant to health with a strong emphasis on encouraging discussion between participants and contributors, to see how FCDO Advisers can take action in their own work in strengthening health systems. The case studies (drawn from FCDO and elsewhere) grounded the theory in practical application.

Of the 124 individual participants, many attended more than one session and the 48 contributors were from FCDO and external. Overall feedback from participants was positive and a good use of their time. Curation of all resources from the sessions were made available to participants after the sessions, and where resources could be made public, became available on the K4D Learning Journey on [Health Systems Strengthening webpage](#).

individuals with necessary knowledge, capabilities, and mindsets, iii) providing access to external evidence, iv) capturing and sharing internal lessons and experience, v) enabling processes for dialogue, learning and innovation, and vi) bringing multiple and diverse perspectives to the table.

K4D researchers (past and present) who had worked on Learning Journeys, were asked to fill in the table with open text responses on if/how in their view the Learning Journey had contributed to each of these criteria. They were also asked to respond with open text responses regarding whether the Learning Journey had met the following outcomes: 'change in policy/programme process or decision'; 'change in knowledge capabilities'; and 'contribution to innovative learning approaches'. Responses were collected for all 33 of the selected Learning Journeys. Our M&E partner Itad drew on relevant existing evaluation data, as well as holding outcome-oriented interviews with FCDO staff in June–July 2022, and contributed this additional data to the spreadsheet outcome columns.

The theory and practice of OL which provided a foundation for the design of the Learning Journey process, is discussed in Section 2, drawing out its relevance for development organisations. Our theoretical framework is presented in Section 3, and draws in particular on Senge's systems thinking for OL. In Sections 4 and 5, the framework is used in a systematic way in this paper to reflect on the effectiveness of the Learning Journey process. Section 6 provides our final reflections and wider

recommendations for development organisations considering how to strengthen their learning processes.

Earlier Theories of Change for the K4D programme made a rather direct link between K4D inputs, activities and processes, and development policy and programming. Our experience suggests that there is a more complex and multi-layered ecosystem of engagement, use of evidence, learning and decision making, which sits between K4D processes and influencing policy/programmes. Understanding this ecosystem of evidence use and learning is critical for optimising the impact of an externally supported knowledge programme.

Our findings are relevant for other development organisations seeking to strengthen their learning. Strategies for OL will need to accommodate uncertainties and crises, seek to build individual capacities and motivation for learning, alongside opportunities and 'safe spaces' for group learning to take place. Learning journeys have contributed to collective understanding of issues and options and internal consensus on directions, which are important capabilities to improve and inform programming or policy.

## 2 Insights from Organisational Learning literature

Organisational learning (OL) refers to how an organisation can learn from experience and adjust to new challenges and opportunities to improve relevance and performance.

This is a complex psychological, social and organisational set of interlinked processes, involving many different aspects related to knowledge generation and use, communication and culture. For this article we draw particularly on the review of approaches to OL by Basten and Haamann (2018).

A foundation of OL theory and practice is Argyris and Schon's (1974), 'Organisational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective'. These authors suggested that OL involves error detection and correction. However, this process is often hampered by governing constraints, such as not questioning authority. This they argued leads to 'espoused theories' and 'theories in use' related to expected and actual behaviours. They developed the notion of single and double loop learning. Single loop learning tries to solve problems by working within the constraints of existing norms, policies, and strategies, while double loop learning seeks to change these, working at a higher order of problem solving. This work highlights the need to understand how formal organisational rules can hamper learning. It acknowledges that what people actually do in an organisation is often different to what they say they are doing, or should be doing. To be effective, OL processes need to understand and make this transparent and lift learning to a higher order of understanding.

Another important strand of OL, and learning theory more generally was the work of David Kolb (1984, 2014) on experiential learning. He conceptualised learning as a cycle, in which learners go through a process of having a concrete experience, reflective observation as they reflect on that experience, abstract conceptualisation to make sense of the experience and draw lessons that have wider application, and active experimentation as the

lessons are put back into practice. This also translated into a recognition that different people have different learning styles related to diverging, assimilating, converging and accommodating. More simply put, some people are more naturally doers, some are thinkers, others are problem solvers, and some are observers (Honey & Mumford 1982). The implications for OL are significant. First, an effective learning process should take people through the different phases of learning; different methods and tools can be used to support this. Second, OL is enhanced by having diversity in teams and acknowledging the different learning styles people bring to the process.

Another significant theory of learning relates to accessing different types of knowledge. Nonaka and Konno (1998) developed the notion of tacit and explicit knowledge in relation to how an organisation learns. Individuals in the organisation hold tacit knowledge from their experience and engagement with others. This can be externalised within a group to become explicit knowledge, which can then be formalised and communicated (see also Heron and Reason (2008) on experiential, presentational, conceptual and practical forms of knowledge). Explicit knowledge, be it developed from within the organisation or from external knowledge sources, needs to be internalised into tacit knowledge for individuals to act on it through their behaviour in the organisation. Again, this points to the importance of understanding the processes of how individuals, groups and organisations learn and what is needed within an organisation for this to be effectively supported. For K4D there was a conscious effort to support the generation of explicit knowledge from within FCDO and its partners, and to complement this with explicit knowledge from research. The Learning Journey process also sought to enable learning cycles, thereby creating time and iteration for explicit knowledge to be internalised into tacit knowledge that can be acted upon.

A set of five building blocks for organisation learning have been proposed by Garvin (1993). These are systemic problem solving, experimentation, learning from experience, learning from others, and transferring knowledge. This approach emphasises that OL needs to be driven by a demand for evidence-based decision making, draw on a range of knowledge sources and give attention to the sharing of knowledge.

An influential top-level framework for OL, which in various ways integrates the foundations for OL outlined above, is Peter Senge's (1997) 'The Fifth Discipline – the art and practice of the learning organisation'. He conceptualises a learning organisation as having five key disciplines: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. These disciplines function across the boundaries of the individual and the organisation. They provide another framing for conceptualising the organisational processes which need to occur if the organisation is to learn.

In looking across these foundations and frameworks for OL, and a vast body of literature, Basten and Haamann (2018) assessed approaches to OL in terms of people, processes and technology. Their study highlights the diversity of approaches to organisation learning and concludes that effective organisation learning requires the concurrent use of multiple approaches, and aligning them to organisational cultures and processes.

When applying OL theory to K4D's experience of working with FCDO, the literature has some gaps in explaining the kind of learning processes which are effective in the context of fast-changing external pressures and internal political priorities. To better understand the ways in which individual, group and OL intersect and can contribute to better decision making for development outcomes, we centred our focus on Senge's systemic approach which provides a comprehensive framework for analysis. We sought to understand how explicit and tacit knowledge are engaged, how external knowledge and expertise can be brought into dialogue with internal expertise, and how collective understandings can be generated and contribute to organisational direction and decision-making. We describe and unpack our Theory of Change for OL in the next section.

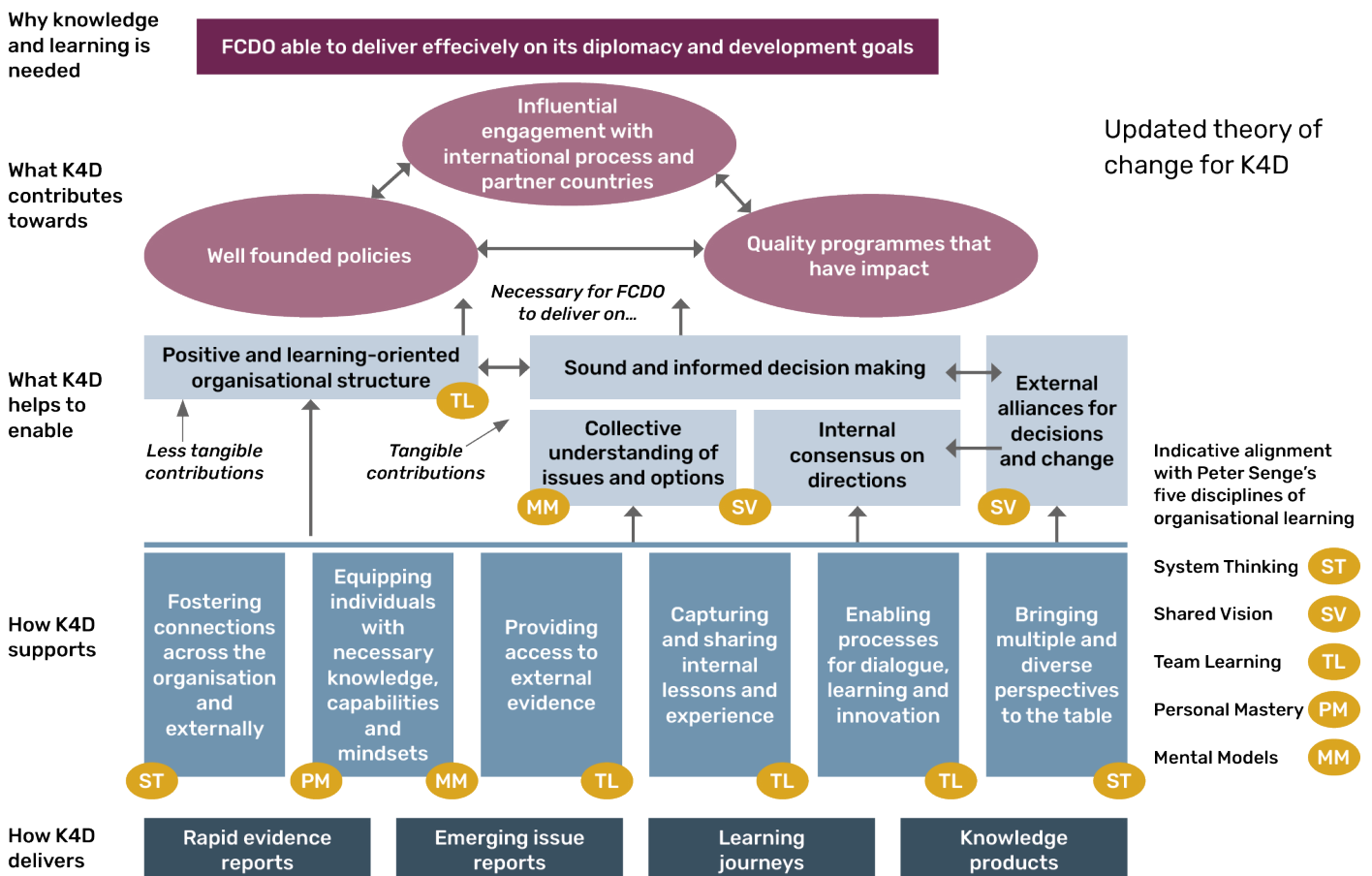
# 3 A conceptual framework for K4Ds Contribution to Organisational Learning in FCDO

At the end of the K4D Programme, K4D staff came together to reflect on how the programme had functioned, the engagement and feedback from FCDO staff, and insights from the monitoring and evaluation of the programme. This led to a more sophisticated understanding of how K4D contributed to organisational learning (OL) than was evident in the programme’s original Theory of Change. A particular challenge for K4D was being able to monitor and evaluate the direct impact on

FCDO’s policies, programmes and international engagement. While there are clear examples of where this direct link is evident, it also become clear that K4D was contributing to a wider “ecosystem” of OL processes that were more intangible but no less valuable.

Figure 1.1 illustrates this conceptualisation of the K4D Programme. Of particular importance are the middle levels of ‘how K4D supports’, and ‘what K4D

**Figure 1.1 How K4D learning and evidence services contribute to organisational learning and decision making within FCDO**



Source: Authors' own

helps to enable'. For these levels the figure also illustrates alignment with Senge's five organisational disciplines. The framework suggests that a primary focus for knowledge and learning support should be on creating the conditions for sound and informed decision making. This in turn requires a positive organisational culture which is learning oriented. More specifically, good decision making (and follow through) requires a collective understanding within the organisation of the core issues and options, and the ability to arrive at an internal consensus on appropriate directions. Further, internal decision making involves an important interplay with external actors. It will often be necessary for FCDO to build or work with alliances, seek wider stakeholder input, and mobilise broad support.

It is through enabling a positive and learning-oriented organisational culture and sound decision making that K4D contributes to i) well-founded policies, ii) quality programmes which have impact, and iii) the capacity of FCDO to have influential engagement with international processes and partner countries. This third element, which was not in the original K4D Theory of Change, became much more significant with the merger of the UK Government's diplomatic and development departments.

We highlight six primary ways in which the programme supports FCDO in its decision making and promotes a supporting culture for OL:

1. Opening space for staff from across FCDO, who otherwise may never engage with each other, to connect, share ideas, reflect on challenges and opportunities and build relationships.
2. Supporting individual staff to develop the knowledge, capabilities, and mindsets necessary to be effective in their professional roles.
3. Supporting the organisation with external evidence and expertise.
4. Enabling staff to capture and share their own experiences, lessons, and knowledge.
5. Bringing to the organisation processes for effective dialogue, learning and innovation.
6. Enabling different internal and external voices to be at the table.

Three dimensions are key in this framing. First, we explicitly connect knowledge and learning processes to decision making. Second, we trace a connection between individual learning, internal OL and learning with external partners and stakeholders. Third, we acknowledge the critical role that more intangible knowledge, learning and engagement processes play in creating a culture for sound and informed decision making, yet which can be hard to quantify.

The K4D approach delivers on these processes in multiple ways, because it combines spaces and processes of learning with outputs such as knowledge products, rapid reviews, and emerging issues reports. In this paper, we focus on learning journeys as a key vehicle for bringing together the evidence, experience and knowledge needed for OL. Evidence of the three intermediary levels of the framework: 'how K4D supports', 'what K4D helps to enable', and 'what K4D contributes towards', are assessed, and discussed, in Sections 4 and 5 below.

# 4 Assessment of learning processes facilitated by Learning Journeys

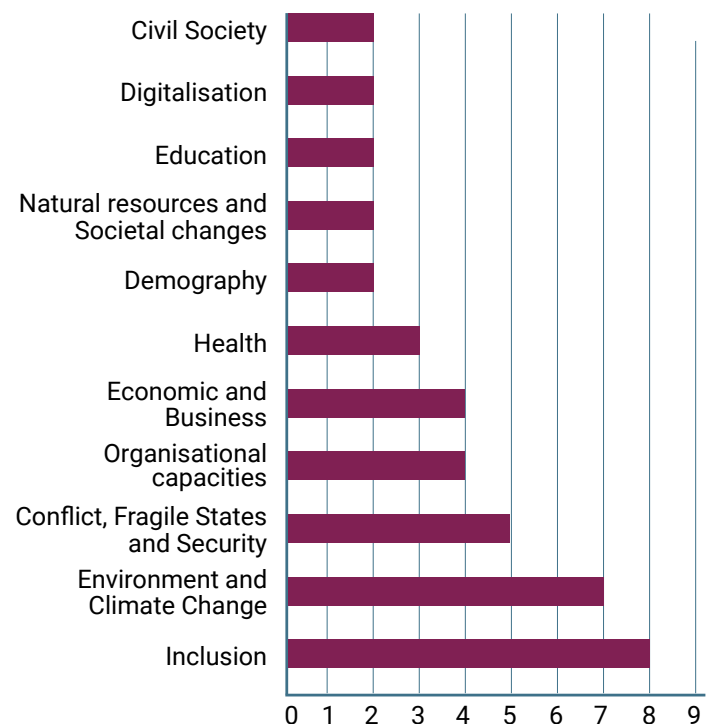
## 4.1 General assessment of K4D Learning Journeys

**K**4D facilitated 33 full learning journeys in cooperation with FCDO (previous with DFID) staff. Three broader purposes for initiating learning journeys could be identified:

1. To strengthen learning and access to evidence and best practices:
  - > Strengthen understanding of complex interrelated emerging topics.
  - > Raise awareness on a specific issue.
  - > Understand changes and dynamics that will impact development outcomes.
  - > Identify knowledge gaps and learning needs.
2. To contribute to specific programmes or interventions:
  - > Support a new strategic vision and priorities.
  - > Adapt existing frameworks, concepts, Theory of Change, and guidance.
  - > Improve capabilities for specific purposes, such as diagnostics, scenario planning, action plans, and business cases.
3. To build internal and external connections:
  - > Support interdisciplinary learning by breaking silos.
  - > Identify good practices and sharing experiences.
  - > Support existing networks with partners and exploring new opportunities to work with new partners.

A quick assessment of the thematic areas covered by these learning journeys over the years shows a wide range of topics (see Figure 2). The top three thematic areas are: i) Inclusive Development, ii) Environment and Climate Change, and iii) Conflict, Fragile States and Security. The full list of learning journeys per thematic area can be found in the Annex. Many learning journeys were multi-disciplinary in their design, however, most of them could still be categorized in one thematic focus area. Six learning journeys were counted in more than one thematic area, including the learning journeys on *Education and Climate Change*, *Tax and Gender*, *Humanitarian Aid and Inclusion*.

**Figure 2. Learning Journeys by thematic areas**



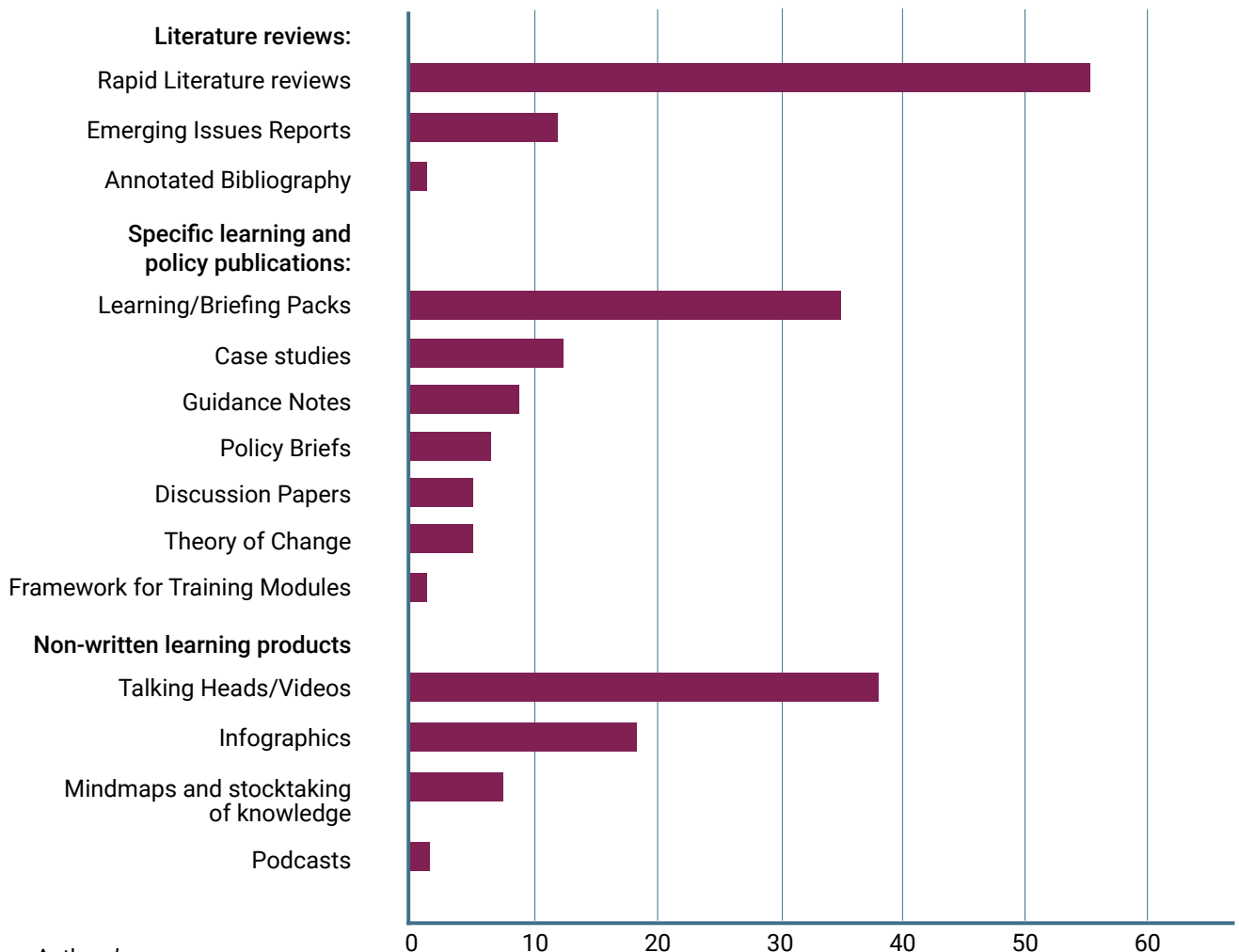
Source: Authors' own

Most learning journeys were not linked with a specific geographical region. There are four exceptions: the learning journeys on the *Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Scenarios*, *MENA Theory of Change for Climate and Environment*, *Demographic Transition in sub-Saharan Africa*, and *Africa Climate*. On the other hand, many learning journeys embedded focus countries, which were often used as case studies. For example, the learning journeys on *Tax and Gender* looked more specifically into the experiences in Pakistan, Ethiopia, and Ghana. The *Water Security* learning journey used Malawi as a case study. The learning journey on *Education Programming and Stability in Fragile and Conflict Affected Countries* did the same for Kenya and South Sudan. The second phase of the learning journey on *Pollution and Poverty* had a regional focus on Southeast Asia.

The requests for learning journeys often came from UK-based head-office staff, which might explain the low number of clear regional or country focused learning journeys. They were often initiated by one cadre or team but endorsed by others. Over the years, country-office staff became increasingly involved in core teams, bringing in experiences from countries. However, they were drawn into the core team during the preparation and implementation period, and less often at the inception stage.

Learning journeys contributed to many knowledge outputs (see Figure 3). The most frequently used outputs were rapid literature reviews, learning/briefing packs, and talking head videos. In total, K4D learning journeys facilitated 152 events. These events ranged from launch events, workshops, to larger roundtable discussions. For these events, external organisations (e.g. implementing partners and other donor agencies) could be invited, but they also could be internally oriented with contributions from invited thematic experts.

**Figure 3. Number of learning journey outputs produced by category**



Source: Authors' own



As illustrated in the framework (Figure 1.1), we conceptualise six pathways through which K4D supported organisational learning (OL); the design and processes of each K4D learning journey rested on a combination of these. Each of these pathways is discussed below.

## 4.2 Fostering connections

Two approaches to fostering connections in learning journeys could be identified: i) building and strengthening internal connections: engagement across cadres, departments, and Whitehall, and ii) fostering external connections: engaging with partner organisations and wider body of practitioners and external experts. Overall, the learning journeys had a stronger internal focus on building connections between different cadres, teams, country offices, and across government departments. To a lesser extent, external organisations were involved throughout the process. Core learning journey teams often prioritised closed spaces for staff to speak freely, with targeted engagement of invited thematic experts.

By focusing on building or strengthening internal connections, teams and cadres that normally do not work together or share experiences and knowledge had the opportunity to connect. In many cases, learning journeys created the momentum to build these important connections. Understanding linkages between disciplines relies on exchange of knowledge and experiences between teams and departments. For example, the *Water Security* learning journey organised masterclasses that brought participants from the Department of International Trade and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs together with FCDO colleagues to discuss trade and water issues. The learning journey on the *Demographic Transition in sub-Saharan Africa* facilitated an internal workshop to foster connections between demographic transition advisers with climate change advisers.

The learning journeys that were most successful in building and fostering internal connections had members of different teams or cadres present within the core organising team from the outset. This ensured ownership and engagement of multiple teams throughout the entire learning journey, and this more sustained engagement forged connections that were sustained beyond

the learning journey. That said, participants also highly valued one-off opportunities for multi-disciplinary exchange and dialogue, as it initiated new connections and changed perspectives.

Learning journeys organised in the lead up to a special event, conference, or summit quickly facilitated multi-disciplinary connections, such as the COP26 Conference in Glasgow which triggered connections between climate change and education. Multi-cadre conferences were also used as springboards to launch learning journeys and make connections, such as the *Leave No One Behind* learning journey which supported two multi-cadre conferences.

Several learning journeys started with an internal focus, and invited external practitioners, partner organisations, civil society organisations, and other donor organisations at a later stage. This was mostly the case for learning journeys that focused on new topics where the initial internal discussions were designed to facilitate internal thinking and identify knowledge gaps. Some of the most urgent knowledge gaps were tackled with literature reviews and other learning outputs. At a later phase, the findings, evidence and insights were discussed with external organisations and practitioners. The *Systems Thinking* learning journey deliberately did the opposite, starting with discussions with externals and ending the journey with internal discussions on how to apply external knowledge to improve internal practices.

Connecting with external organisations was often linked to the publication of a specific learning tool. The *Gender Equality* learning journey published a guidance note for which external organisations were consulted and invited to engage in discussions, such as Gates Foundation, Government of Canada, British Council, and USAID. However, few learning journeys managed to connect with external organisations throughout the process. An exception was the *Pollution and Poverty* learning journey that partnered with Pure Earth and the Global Alliance on Health and Pollution. Also, the *Civil Society* learning journey engaged with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in a collaborative approach from the outset, to identify good practice for working with CSOs, and with the aim of developing a systematic approach to collaborative learning (see Box 2). The *Water Security* learning journey added value by creating briefing packs and other forms of documentation

which brought stakeholders on various occasions together in one space to coordinate and share knowledge.

### 4.3 Equipping individuals with necessary knowledge capabilities and mindsets

A core objective of learning journeys is to equip individuals with necessary knowledge capabilities and mindsets. Workshops and roundtable discussions were designed to increase active learning through knowledge exchange (e.g. creating safe spaces to exchange information), specific publications (e.g. case studies, briefing packs), learning products (infographics, videos) and literature reviews gave individuals opportunities to learn about new evidence and best practices, and how to frame complex and interrelated issues. Examples include the learning journey on *Businesses and Political Elites*, which participants reported contributed to recognition of the value and framing of multi-disciplinary work. The *Water Security* learning journey used briefing packs to share knowledge with diplomats to equip them to have debates and discussions during World Water Week.

Some learning journeys supported existing cross-cadre or other multi-disciplinary teams, communities of practice and networks. The objective of these learning journeys was to strengthen the network by supporting knowledge capabilities and reshaping perspectives. For example, the cross-cadre Demography Network engaged in the learning journey on the *Demographic Transition in sub-Saharan Africa*, and the cross-government security and justice network engaged in the learning journey on *Security and Access to Justice*.

Often strengthening capabilities was targeted at specific tasks, such as country diagnostics (e.g. learning journey on *Pollution and Poverty*), a Theory of Change (e.g. learning journey on *Africa Climate*), and service delivery (e.g. learning journey on *Essential Services in Conflict and Protracted Crises*). However, there are challenges to cover all capability needs. For example, the learning journey on *Scaling up Inclusive Approaches* had originally intended to improve the capabilities of advisers and programme managers to design programmes differently to

take inclusion to scale. However, in practice there was less attention on how internal incentives (informed by institutional structures, capacities, and norms) shape decision-making processes and affect outcomes. Other challenges related to personnel transferred during a learning journey to other teams. On some occasions, a learning journey had to be paused or cancelled when key staff were unavailable for a prolonged time, for example during the Covid-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, a flexible and open approach between the K4D consortium members and FCDO enabled quick responses to opportunities. During the pandemic, several initiatives started up, including the Covid-19 Evidence Summaries on Health (linked with the *Strengthening Health Systems* learning journey) and on Demographic Indicators (linked with the learning journey on the *Demographic Transition in sub-Saharan Africa*). These evidence summaries were valued and shared widely amongst policymakers to increase their knowledge and perspectives with emerging evidence from research.

### 4.4 Providing access to external evidence

Literature reviews and other learning products provided external evidence. This evidence was often used to provide access to concise synthesised knowledge tools, such as guidance notes, infographics, a Theory of Change, or a policy brief. For example, the *Businesses and Political Elite* learning journey used external evidence (including empirical evidence) to map and discuss key issues, such as anti-corruption, fair tax, and formal and informal state-business relationships. The learning journey on *Youth Employment and Citizenship* synthesised evidence and reviewed literature and best practices and, at a later stage, organised a roundtable discussion with external experts and practitioners to present and discuss lessons learned based on the available evidence.

Learning journeys also offered briefing packs as input material for workshops and roundtable discussions. The *Health Systems Strengthening* learning journey developed a series of 'modules' with pre-reading materials. Packaging workshop discussions as learning products after events ensured evidence remained accessible. However, without a K4D website - which the terms of the

funding from DFID/FCDO did not allow for - it was a challenge to find a space where all information could be shared. On some occasions, external websites or platforms were used, mainly as partners of a learning journey. The *Pollution and Poverty* learning journey used a webpage on HEART, linking to the landmark Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health report, and supported by infographics and videos from external resources and infographics developed by the K4D learning journey. At later stages of the K4D programme, participants were given access to an internal K4D platform where all resources became accessible. Internal platforms within FCDO/DFID also provided opportunities but could not be managed by the K4D team.

Several learning journeys also used 'talking head' videos in which experts discuss evidence or the relevance of a topic. In the case of the *Water Security* learning journey these videos were shared with diplomats. Diplomats were able to access insights through video interviews with the Special Envoy for International Water Affairs for the Netherlands, the Executive Director and co-founder of Alliance for Global Water Adaptation (AGWA), and the Strategic Programme Director for Water, Climate Change and Resilience at the International Water Management Institute (IWMI).

## 4.5 Capturing and sharing internal lessons and experience

Along with fostering internal connections, learning journeys also captured and shared internal lessons and experiences. In many cases, initial scoping meetings were organised to discuss priority areas and knowledge gaps with the core participating groups, on the basis of which the learning journey was shaped.

Another way to capture and share experiences was through (cross-cadre) workshops and roundtable discussions for staff to share lessons learned, challenges, best practices etc. For example, the learning journey on *Essential Services in Conflict and Protracted Crises* facilitated four focus group discussions, in which advisors, working in different areas and countries, were grouped. They discussed their experiences and lessons learned around the themes of investment, collaboration, designing and managing programmes. Participants in the focus group discussions were positive about this

opportunity to hear about each other's experiences. The *Tax and Gender* learning journey facilitated an internal workshop with a focus on how existing tax programmes could be adapted to make them work better for women. Participants valued the learning journey, as it provided a space to collectively discuss priorities, partnerships and emerging issues.

A third way to capture such internal learning is through primary research. Some learning journeys conducted interviews with staff, after which the results were synthesized in internal reports, while some other learning journeys mapped internal stakeholders and approaches. The learning journey conducted for the Prosperity Fund carried out interviews with several staff to capture and share insights about the Global Health Programme, to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the programme and to capture perspectives on adaptation.

## 4.6 Enabling processes for dialogue, learning and innovation

A dialogic approach is at the heart of the learning journey methodology, and many offered a series of sessions for internal dialogues with short inputs from external experts or from FCDO staff with experience and case studies to share, allowing time for participants to raise questions and share perspectives. This approach enabled dialogue to be sustained and for participants to make links between their own practice and the case studies. For example, in the *Security and Justice* learning journey, dialogue was fostered between country offices, and with participants from external institutions, which linked theory to practice, improved knowledge capabilities, and shifted FCDO thinking around this complex topic.

An unexpected positive aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic was that it accelerated the use of online platforms and the opportunity to experiment with digital tools. The Mural app (a virtual whiteboard for collaborative working) encouraged 'hands-on' active participation in workshops and was much appreciated by participants. Workshops and roundtable discussions often used participatory methods (such as collaborative scenario planning, role play games, Rich Picture drawing, photography, and video presentations) to facilitate dialogue, learning and innovation for different learning types.

These participatory methods - in person and online - encouraged sharing of experiences, eliciting of reflections, collective analysis, active listening and dialogue. The use of briefing packs before events also served to stimulate dialogue, while presentation slide packs and event summary reports after events created opportunities for continued reflection and conversation.

Collaborative engagement in specific tasks, such as building and revising a Theory of Change, was highly participatory. The *Inclusion in Crises* learning journey included processes of consulting with external stakeholders, internal scoping workshops, internal reflections on drafts of the Theory of Change, and discussion of the final draft with external experts and stakeholders. Such feedback loops were important to generate critical reflections. Other learning journeys used case studies or scenario thinking to understand and discuss complexities.

However, time constraints reduced the innovative pedagogic ambition in some cases. The *Leaving No one Behind in a Digital World* learning journey had planned to use an iterative learn-adapt approach involving rapid cycles of testing, learning and reflection with key partners to produce a set of end-user relevant products. While the learning journey was successful in meeting its goals, it was not possible to adopt an adaptive approach throughout, due to how time-intensive adaptive management can be and the limited time available of K4D researchers to support.

## 4.7 Bringing multiple and diverse perspectives to the table

A key contribution of learning journeys was to bring together multiple perspectives on an issue or topic. Often, this was achieved by bringing a diverse group of experts and practitioners to the table. Diverse perspectives were also stimulated through cross-cadres and cross-departmental connections. One way to guarantee multi-stakeholder processes and engagement within learning journeys was by setting up a diverse technical working group. For example, K4D, former-DFID, former-FCO, Stabilisation Unit, CSSF and the Prosperity Fund were all part of the technical working group that oversaw the *Prosperity Fund* learning journey's remit. The Civil Society learning journey brought FCDO staff into dialogue with selected CSO leaders (see Box 2).

## Box 2: Case study – The Civil Society Learning Journeys

### Background

The first civil society learning journey ‘What is Civil Society and how can we work well together?’ was launched in 2018 with the objective of pooling and sharing the knowledge and understandings of staff around the nature and importance of a vibrant and healthy civil society, its range and diversity and the different roles it can play in meeting ODA priorities. As well as knowledge and learning within HMG, a secondary aim was to increase awareness among Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) of former-DFID processes and policies, and to support working relationships. A second learning journey started in 2022, when members of the Social Development cadre at the now merged FCDO decided to produce a guide to advise the relatively new government department on effective working with civil society organisations.

### Why knowledge and learning were needed

In both civil society learning journeys, there was a recognition of the considerable knowledge that already existed across the department on funding and working with CSOs based on many years of experience. FCDO commissioners were looking for an opportunity to share this, but also to critique and legitimise it, through interactions with current evidence, research and feedback from northern and southern partners. Key issues included the strengths and weaknesses of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), the effectiveness of different funding mechanisms, ways of measuring effectiveness, how far funding CSOs contributes to the promotion of democratic freedoms, and the role and relative importance of social movements.

### What K4D contributed to

Knowledge from both learning journeys was intended to inform policy and donor practice, helping DFID/FCDO to understand better how and what to fund, the impact of their different policies, and to support programme managers across the stages of project cycles. As an FCDO participant observed, *‘what, and how, to fund may seem like a dry subject but it is central to the way we do our work’*.

### How K4D supports and what K4D delivers

The first phase started with online discussions bringing together selected CSOs and FBO representatives to dialogue with each other and with members of the Civil Society team. These were designed to operate as a community of practice, helping to inform each group of the way the other works. Shared priorities for additional knowledge and learning were distilled from these sessions and webinars commissioned to present the latest research and practice in these areas.

The second phase worked in almost the opposite direction, beginning with some questions FCDO is currently asking, commissioning six reports to review the evidence and then assembling individuals to lead discussions on these in four online meetings. Three of the discussions were open to CSOs and advertised via Bond as well as across FCDO. The fourth, a closed internal discussion enabled FCDO representatives to discuss funding mechanisms between themselves and how these are working in response to new internal strategies.

### What K4D helps to enable

The combination of evidence reviews, plus online discussions, brought policy makers and programmers within the organisation together to share and deconstruct their individual experiences. By commissioning reviews in advance, the second learning journey was able to frame these discussions around key debates. Even in the rapid one-hour time frame given for sessions, responders were able to challenge or affirm report findings, and FCDO staff and CSO representatives were able to present examples of how these played out in different country settings. These have laid the groundwork for a guidance note and provided background material for further reading. A community of practice approach, that included internal staff and partners, provides a broader perspective, facilitating networking and allowing partners to speak back to funders and providing a space in which their concerns can be raised.

# 5 From learning processes to decision-making outcomes

## 5.1 From supporting learning to enabling intermediate outcomes

The K4D Theory of Change assumes that when K4D learning journeys support the individual and group learning through the six processes evidenced and discussed above, it helps to enable five higher-level interconnected outcomes:

- > collective understanding of issues and options
- > internal consensus on directions
- > external alliances for decisions and change
- > sound and informed decision making
- > and a positive, learning-oriented organisational culture.

The analysis of findings about how learning journeys support learning processes in FCDO, as presented in section 4, offers some evidence that learning journeys help to enable sound and informed decision-making through collective understanding of issues and options, and through internal consensus on directions. The methods used to capture and share internal learning, foster internal connections, present external evidence, and bring in other perspectives, contributed to these intermediate outcomes. Section 4 also shows that enabling external alliances for decisions and change was a less likely intermediate outcome, because most learning journeys only engaged in limited ways with external organisations. Furthermore, although learning journeys might have contributed to a positive and learning oriented organisational culture in former DFID and now FCDO, this is more difficult to evidence. As such, this section will focus on how learning journeys enabled *internal consensus on directions*, and *collective understanding of issues and options*, to contribute to *sound and informed decision making*.

As part of the monitoring and evaluation process, Itad conducted interviews with FCDO staff who had taken part in each learning journey, and to identify impact stories. The impact stories show that learning journeys not only facilitated access to relevant evidence and fostered connections, but also enabled collective understanding of issues and options and internal consensus on directions, and as such contributed to changes in programme or policy directions.

## 5.2 Collective understanding of issues and internal consensus on direction

Participation in a learning journey went beyond building an individual's capacity on emerging topics, as many respondents mentioned increased capabilities to share knowledge and engage with others on these topics, contributing to the intermediate outcome of collective understanding of issues and options. A participant in the *Security and Justice* learning journey said that they 'would apply learning ... when advising teams for programme design and evaluation of existing programmes', and viewed the learning journey as 'very relevant – broadening scope of experience'. A participant in the learning journey on *Education and Conflict* reported that they were able to raise better questions with implementing partners during review processes. A participant in the *Health Systems Strengthening* learning journey described their experience as strengthening their knowledge on the topic and its importance, and equipping advisers on how to engage with colleagues on topics relevant to HSS.

Many participants appreciated how they were able to make links between theory and practice through the learning journey processes, which is important for collective understanding, particularly of complex issues. Some valued their increased understanding of 'how theory applies to practice rather than further in-depth technical knowledge', which was

felt to be an important professional development opportunity. In the *Security and Justice* learning journey, a participant highlighted the importance of both conceptual and experiential knowledge: '[it was] useful to get more conceptual clarity on political violence and response; useful to have that framework; and exchanging concrete experiences'. The *Water Security* learning journey was valued for providing 'an opportunity to link theory, evidence and practice and in particular hearing about others' practical experiences and problem solving'. The link from theory to practice was highlighted: '... there was a really fruitful discussion on the So What? - in other words, problem diagnosis is one thing but what can we actually do in the real world'.

Learning journeys were also valued for understanding the state of internal knowledge, bridging between perspectives, and opening up from a technical to a political conversation; contributing to the intermediate outcome of internal consensus on directions. Participants reflected on the importance of consensus on knowledge gaps and needs, prior to moving into political implications, particularly with relation to seeing 'the bigger picture', 'the system' or across disciplines. In the *Food Systems* learning journey, the process was felt to have contributed to a better understanding of systems thinking and increased capacity for understanding knowledge gaps and identifying needs for further research. The *Tax and Gender* learning journey was felt to have produced 'additional knowledge', for example, by adding a new angle to the tax discussions on small-businesses, by focusing on women-led small businesses in the informal economy. One participant stated: 'We are

now more able to make explicit linkages between what we know about tax in general and what we know about gender and its interaction'.

Over time, the concept of learning journeys evolved and improved, so that FCDO staff were better able to take an active part in steering the content and delivery of the learning journeys, and the learning products to suit their needs. It can be argued that practising this collaborative approach may have contributed to a positive learning culture in the organisation; similarly, that experience of the participatory learning methods used in learning journeys encourages a positive approach to learning. These learning methods also enabled collective understanding of issues and consensus on directions. At least half of the learning journeys built, strengthened, or supported communities of practice. This mechanism was understood to be an important form of OL. Working with the Community of Practice was highly valued for example in the *Tax and Gender* learning journey:

“ We already have a community of practice, [which works] a little bit like a learning journey, in that it brings specialists together to discuss topics. K4D has taught us differently the importance of specialising in particular topics and having a theme to run across, to run different sessions on. That's been really useful. ”

Other learning journeys demonstrated how evidence can be brought into dialogic spaces so that a specially convened group of professionals or

### Box 3: Accessible and relevant knowledge products

The *Mental Health* Learning Journey produced 'Mental Health for Sustainable Development: A Topic Guide for Development Professionals' which received over 6,500 OpenDocs downloads, more than any single resource during 2020. Learning from this Learning Journey contributed to a guidance note for humanitarian advisors produced in collaboration between FCDO and WHO.

Another example, the *Scaling Up* Learning Journey produced an Emerging Issues report 'Scaling Up Inclusive Approaches for Marginalised and Vulnerable People' which was published in IDS OpenDocs. As of the end of September 2022, there have been over 8,000 page views and 640 downloads. This shows: 1) a large audience can be reached and is viewing or downloading the materials, 2) the data from the last six months shows continued uptake of the learning today, nearly four years after publication, 3) from the statistics available on OpenDocs (which only shows a country breakdown of the page views and downloads for the last 6 months), the majority of views across the different materials in that period are from the US, other countries include the UK, Denmark, Canada, Ethiopia, China, Pakistan and many others.

working groups can generate knowledge together. In the *Systems Thinking* learning journey, different sessions brought together theory with evidence of its application, which led to a co-created guide. The *Civil Society Guide* learning journey enabled extensive evidence gathering, followed by shared discussion amongst policy advisers, experts, and practitioners, to inform an internal document.

### 5.3 Sound and informed decision-making

Several FCDO respondents stated that learning journeys informed critical decision-making processes in organisational policy or strategy, or in assisting in agenda setting. For example, the *Demographics and Development* learning journey informed former-DFID's Africa strategy; the *Changing Food Systems* learning journey generated materials which contributed to agenda setting and improved discussions with high-level staff on the topic. A participant in the *Education Programming and Stability in FCAS* learning journey reported using one of the country case studies to inform their regional strategy, and that it 'formed the anchor for informing the design of our new stability and cross-border programme'. Another participant reported the learning journey was helpful in their business planning process because it gave them a deeper understanding of the links between education and stability, and the potential benefit to prioritising education programmes.

Some learning journeys contributed to decision-making at specific external moments or linked to internal processes. The examples highlight the importance for learning journeys to be responsive and to move quickly when opportunities arise. Knowledge produced in the *Water Security* learning journey was used in ministerial speeches. The lead researcher of the *Climate, Environment and Stability* learning journey felt that it had been 'influential in the lead up to COP26'. The *Gender Equality* learning journey provided guidance across government on how to adopt the new gender equality strategy. How these outcomes are sustained is difficult to attribute. To give an example, the *Education and Climate Change* learning journey was influential in the lead up to COP26, including shaping FCDO education priorities related to climate crisis, and creating consensus across donor and partner responses to the issue (i.e. USAID, Education Cannot Wait (ECW)). A respondent reported application of learning, but was cautious not to 'over-emphasise' the influence of the learning journey on wider FCDO learning processes:

“ The learning journey didn't influence all our learning...but that evidence piece was a solid piece of work...and now [we are] developing a...broader strategy on climate change, environment, nature... [which was] very timely...part of the reason we pushed it as we didn't have much research...the timing was right for policy influencing. ”

Feedback from other learning journeys highlighted the influence on awareness raising of specific issues across government and the wider development community. For example, a participant in the *Tax and Gender* learning journey stated:

“ We plan to use these products as a means to build awareness across the organisation and across partners - already looking at having round table discussion with [a] developing country partner and their revenue authority, hopefully we can do more of that. From our perspective, this is a good tool to engage people in conversation on the topic of Tax and Gender, as a hook, and to share the best practice that's been recorded in conversations to help facilitate future discussion and identify opportunities to provide support. ”

In more specific ways, some learning journeys contributed to decision-making on programme design. In the feedback from the final event of the learning journey on *Scaling up Inclusive Approaches*, 100% of participants who completed the feedback form said that they intended to use the learning to inform programme and project design. The *Africa Climate* learning journey contributed to the development of a business case for a new Africa Climate programme. The *Inclusion in Crises* learning journey was intended to support internal discussion and capacities around inclusion and to promote the consideration of inclusion across all programming and policy. The FCDO lead reported that the learning journey 'has fed into the development, for example of the South Sudan business case, the Yemen business case - all upcoming programmes. It also directly helped reinforce the GESI analysis process - we were able to bring in technical learning from the GESI analysis that K4D put together, to inform how that consultancy was carried out'.



Improved programming can be linked to increased knowledge and confidence around a particular theme. 'Confidence in having the appropriate evidence for decisions, and that one's understanding is coherent with colleagues', underpins good decision-making. The *Mental Health* learning journey was reported as useful by the participating country office staff, to explore approaches and partners for integrating mental health into their work; other teams reported increased confidence in embedding mental health in their programming.

## 5.4 How learning journeys contribute to higher-level outcomes

The K4D framework proposes that the presence of intermediary outcomes within the organisation will eventually strengthen FCDO's ability to deliver well-founded policies, quality programmes that have impact, and influential engagement with international processes and partner countries. However, it is challenging to identify causality between learning journeys and these higher outcomes. For example, while there is evidence that learning journeys contributed to collective understanding and shaped the direction of thinking of complex issues relevant for the COP26 summit on climate change, how this learning actually influenced the position of the UK government in these negotiations is not clear.

Monitoring and evaluation processes struggle to capture such evidence particularly as learning journeys are one amongst many other learning and political processes that impact on FCDO programme, partnership, and policy outcomes.

However, the evidence on intermediary outcomes, combined with the increased demand for learning journeys over the years, suggests that learning journeys have been valued by FCDO staff as a learning tool to aid evidence-based decision-making processes for programmes, strategies, and policies. The ambition is that these decisions, and resulting policies and programmes, are contributing to quality interventions that ultimately positively influence development outcomes. However, such outcomes are outside the direct sphere of influence of an evidence and learning programme such as K4D.

## 6 Final reflections

The previous sections provided evidence of how learning journeys support the six pillars of individual and group learning (4.2); how these processes help to enable the five organisational behaviours we believe underpin an effective learning organisation (see 5.1); and how these behaviours contribute towards effective organisational policy and practice (5.2).

As we move upwards within the TOC conceptual framework, the causal linkages are more difficult to claim. We have plentiful evidence of how K4D supports learning across the six pillars, some evidence of how this translates into positive OL behaviours, but limited measurable evidence of how these behaviours contribute to the organisational outcomes (policies, partnerships, programmes) which underpin the effectiveness of FCDO. This is unsurprising - there are few *direct* links between learning activities and higher-level outcomes. The OL literature (Argyris & Schon 1974; Senge 1997), emphasises the importance of intangible aspects such as 'mental models', 'system thinking' and 'shared vision' for effective learning in an organisation.

The difficulty of following the 'golden thread' through from inputs to impacts in this arena, poses a dilemma for development organisations wanting to strengthen/invest in learning. Do we accept that we cannot measure all aspects of individual, group and organisational learning and take a leap of faith that it is the right thing to do? Or try to establish ways of measuring intangible aspects, which puts more pressure on already overstretched staff? Or do we decide only to invest in learning activities that have clear measurable outcomes, and leave aside the intangibles because they are too difficult to track and therefore hard to justify the investment? This very dilemma led us to develop the theoretical framework discussed in this paper, to better understand the factors and processes that lie in the complex mix between learning activities (inputs) and organisational effectiveness (impact).

We consider that K4D learning journeys have contributed to OL, both through the more measurable and tangible aspects discussed in the

previous section, and in intangible ways. We base our assessment on the evidence discussed in this paper, on the high scores received from FCDO annual reviews, and on the high demand for learning journeys, which gained momentum as we grew better at communicating the offer and managing the process.

Learning journeys are not the only way for an organisation to learn. As Basten and Haamann (2018) state in their review of OL, effective learning requires multiple approaches, aligned to organisational cultures and processes. However, analysis of learning journeys conducted with FCDO against our revisited Theory of Change has helped to identify their contribution. The analysis also contributes to a more sophisticated understanding about how learning inputs (and what kind) lead to OL, recognition of their indirect as well as direct contribution to outcomes, and the intangible nature of some intermediate outcomes.

We close with some reflections about what works for OL that we have gained through our experience of the K4D programme more broadly, as well as focusing in on the learning journeys.

We have highlighted the importance of **the process elements of learning**. The OL literature highlights the need to work with tacit as well as explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Konno 1998), and the benefits of learning processes which provide space for these forms of knowledge to be brought into dialogue are illustrated in this paper. Dialogue can enable double loop learning, which is highlighted in the OL literature (Argyris & Schon 1974). This requires investing in spaces and processes for critical reflection, which can be hard to justify and maintain in organisations which have to respond quickly to changing external contexts. However, facilitated processes for learning create or strengthen group interactions, enabling people to analyse different sources of evidence (including knowhow) and generate new knowledge together, rather than repeating existing norms and approaches. For organisations seeking to address complex and intersecting issues, engaging with theory, evidence and practice can enable double loop learning which

can be linked into ongoing activities to inform business planning, implementation and decision-making. Process learning underpins adaptive management.

This assessment of learning journeys has also highlighted **the value of the relational elements of organisational learning**. Investment in OL requires not only provision of knowledge, but also enabling the interconnection between individual learning, internal OL and learning with external partners and stakeholders. Central to this, is the creation or strengthening and resourcing of learning spaces. Pålshaugen (1998) considers these 'internal public spheres' to be essential for an organisation to develop as well as to operate – spaces in which staff can explore issues outside of their everyday roles, in order to increase their capacity and conditions for carrying out operations. Learning journeys create spaces for the brokering of internal engagement across teams and levels; they enable dialogue and knowledge exchange across the organisation. An appreciation of learning as a relational activity strengthens collegiality and recognizes the value of experiential knowledge

**High quality external evidence** and theoretical knowledge enrich the quality of dialogue and contribute to double loop learning. We have highlighted the benefits of rapid evidence syntheses and emerging issue reviews. These can be commissioned in advance to help shape the learning journey design, or can be commissioned during the process, as knowledge gaps emerge. They enable staff in the organisation to quickly access up-to-date evidence, frame their discussions, and link their experiences to key debates.

**The external learning provider needs particular capacities:** in the case of K4D, a consortium approach enabled an offer with a breadth and depth of expertise that could respond to FCDO knowledge needs across its thematic priorities, with an ability to draw in researchers and thematic leads across leading academic institutions. A consortium can ensure that researchers have the range of expertise and can produce relevant knowledge outputs.

Researchers needed to be adaptive and responsive – a demand driven model requires the provider to invest in long-term relationships with the client in

order to understand their evidence needs, identify links to policy and practice, and align with the realities of the context in which the organisation operates. Flexibility is key to respond and reshape a learning journey at key moments, and research staff need to be able to work collaboratively to design a process which addresses emerging learning and knowledge needs. Skilled design and facilitation of learning journeys and events, especially via online tools and activities, has been key to optimizing active engagement and the learning outcomes.

The consortium needs to include creative and communications experts who can draw learning products together into accessible formats; we have learnt the value of building accessible platforms to store learning products which have included visuals, animations, short videos and podcasts as well as helpdesk reports and longer reports on emerging issues. Finally, effective operational systems and clarity of management are key. Providing and improving guidelines on logistics and processes is important, as well as regular meetings and communication.

Finally, **leadership support within the learning organisation is** critical for the legitimacy of the K4D programme and to ensure active engagement of staff. This leadership needs to encourage and enable staff to engage, lead by example by joining learning journeys themselves, advertise and communicate learning opportunities across the organisation.

Better understanding about what works to support staff to access timely evidence, and to exchange and reflect on knowledge and experiences in learning spaces, while embedding this knowledge in their policies, programmes and practices, can make an important contribution to the development sector: a priority as increasing global instability accelerates the need for and importance of up-to-date evidence and learning. In situations of rapid change, adaptability and learning are paramount, and an effective organisation needs to 'discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at *all* levels' (Senge, 1990:4).

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# Annex: Learning Journey

## Topic categories

\* Falls within more than one category

### **Economics and Business**

- > Businesses and Political Elites
- > Responsible Business Engagement
- > Gender and Tax\*
- > Prosperity Fund C-19 Evidence Initiative\*

### **Conflict, Fragile States and Security**

- > Essential Services in Conflict and Protracted Crises
- > Education Programming and Stability in Fragile and Conflict Affected Countries\*
- > Security and Access to Justice
- > Humanitarian and Inclusion\*
- > Climate, Environment and Stability\*

### **Demographics**

- > Demographics and Development
- > Supporting a Demographic Transition in sub-Saharan Africa

### **Environment and Climate change**

- > Pollution and Poverty
- > Climate and Environment CPD
- > Education and Climate Change\*
- > Climate, Environment and Stability\*
- > Africa Climate
- > International Nature
- > MENA TOC Climate and Environment

### **Natural Resources and Societal Changes**

- > Changing Food Systems
- > Water Security

### **Health**

- > Mental health
- > Health Systems Strengthening
- > Prosperity Fund C-19 Evidence Initiative\*

### **Education**

- > Education Programming and Stability in Fragile and Conflict Affected Countries\*
- > Education and Climate Change\*

### **Digital**

- > Data Capabilities\*
- > Digital

### **Inclusion**

- > Youth Employment and Citizenship
- > Gender Equality
- > Scaling Up Inclusive Approaches
- > Leaving No One Behind
- > Disability
- > Tax and Gender\*
- > Humanitarian and Inclusion\*
- > Prosperity Fund C-19 Evidence Initiative\*

### **Organisational Capabilities**

- > Evaluation
- > Data Capabilities\*
- > Systems Thinking
- > MENA Scenarios

### **Civil Society**

- > Civil Society
- > Civil Society Guide



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