

How funders can better understand their performance: Five easy tools

A White Paper by Giving Evidence

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'The best is the enemy of the good'

- Voltaire

About Giving Evidence

Giving Evidence is a consultancy and campaign, promoting charitable *giving* based on sound *evidence*.

Through consultancy, Giving Evidence works with funders of all kinds and in many countries to help make their giving as effective as possible by ensuring that it uses sound evidence. We help them to understand their impact and find ways to increase it. Through campaigning and thought-leadership, we show what evidence is available, what is needed, and drive up the quality of evidence which is gathered and considered.

Giving Evidence was founded by Caroline Fiennes, a former award-winning charity CEO, and author of *It Ain't What You Give, It's The Way That You Give It*. Caroline speaks and writes extensively about effective giving, e.g., at the Skoll World Forum, in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Freakonomics, and the Daily Mail. She is on boards of The Cochrane Collaboration, Charity Navigator (the world's largest charity ratings agency), the US Center for Effective Philanthropy and the Centre for Global Development.

Liora Wulf has worked in the private and charitable sectors to improve project design, clarify thinking around outcomes and impact, and secure funding in excess of £1 million for a range of large and small non-profit organisations. She has a degree in Politics and Philosophy.

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Introduction: Don't let the best be the enemy of the good

Philanthropic donors and foundations are rightly concerned to understand the effect of their work in order to see where and how to improve. Yet there's a problem. Identifying and measuring a funder's impact is difficult, and often impossible. Realising the difficulty, many funders* stop trying: a recent study found that, though 91 per cent of funders think that measuring their impact can help them improve, one in five measures nothing pertaining to their impact at all.

Giving Evidence has found five tools which successfully help funders to better understand their performance. This paper outlines them, and we recommend them all. They are each easy to use – perhaps even seeming rather obvious – yet they are all currently under-used.

We make no claim that they give the *best* conceivable measure of a funder's social impact. None gives a precise assessment of what has happened which would not have happened otherwise, and none individually gives a complete picture. However these tools have a distinct advantage over that *best* picture in that they are feasible. We have found that understanding funders' performance is rather like understanding the economy, in that several measures and opinion are necessary. Each of these tools gives a line of sight into some meaningful aspect of a funder's performance which highlights features to retain and features to improve. They are demonstrably *good* and useful tools.

That said, we recognize the pain which acknowledging one's own under-performance can bring. Since most funders face little or no external scrutiny, facing this pain is essentially optional. Senior management need to make it 'safe' for staff to admit mistakes, by setting up suitable data-collection systems and rewarding honesty.

The five easy tools

The tools involve understanding:

- Are our grants succeeding?
- Is the patient getting better? Leaving aside causation for a second, is the problem we're addressing getting better or worse? There's normally some relevant third-party data.
- Could we release hidden funds by streamlining our processes?
- What do our grantees think of us?
- What have we learnt? Identify and articulate lessons about performance and experience, and share them externally such that others can learn too.

We are happy to discuss them with anyone, and welcome your feedback.

* For concision, this paper uses 'funder' and 'donor' interchangeably and to mean any serious funder, including grant-making foundation, family or corporate foundation, government fund, community foundation etc. All the tools described here could also be used by impact investors with only mild adaptation. What we say about 'grant' also applies to loans, quasi-equity investments or straight-forward equity investments and where we use 'grantee', one could also use 'investee'. We use 'charity' to mean any operating organisation which seeks non-earned funds from elsewhere: such organisations could be other non-profits, such as universities, local authorities etc., social enterprises or indeed for-profit organisations in the case of impact investors. Some of the analysis pertains also to operating foundations: for example, they too could track the success rate of their programmes and publish tales of difficulties they've encountered.

A funder's impact isn't the sum of the impact of its grants

To understand if they're doing well, funders often look to understand the total impact of work supported by their various grants. But this is not helpful for several reasons. First, often the impact cannot meaningfully be aggregated because the work is too diverse. Second, since funders' effect is vicarious (through the organisations they support), we would need to distinguish contribution from attribution. That would involve carving up the grantee's impact between the various funders and others who enabled it, which is normally messy and meaningless. Third, even this doesn't indicate what might have happened otherwise, without the funder. Perhaps the grantees would have received money from elsewhere very easily; or conversely perhaps the work wouldn't have happened at all. And fourth, none of this indicates whether the funder could have helped more: sometimes organisations achieve success *despite* a meddling funder.

Furthermore, sometimes funders learn lessons which could be useful to others. Hence at a couple of points in this document we suggest not only using these tools to learn internally but also sharing the lessons externally to strengthen the sector.

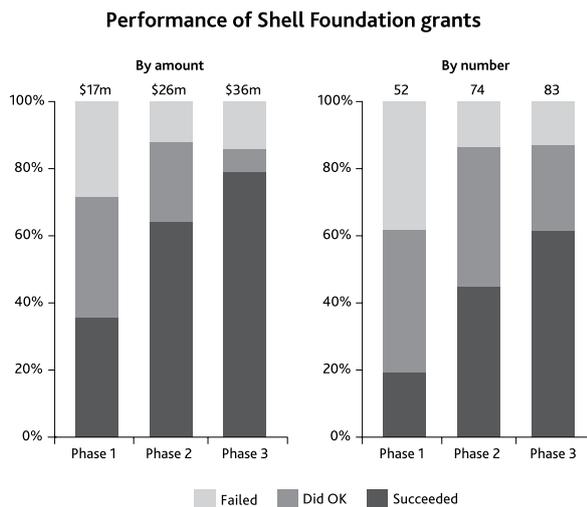
**'If I have seen farther it is by standing on
the shoulders of giants'**

- Sir Isaac Newton (in a rare moment of humility)

1. Are our grants succeeding?

Most grants are made with some goal in mind. So do they achieve that?

In its early days, Shell Foundation made loads of grants. After a while, it graded each one according to whether it ‘succeeded’, ‘did OK’ or ‘failed’. Hardly any succeeded. So Shell Foundation changed its model: whereas it had been making many, small grants on a reactive basis, it started now to make fewer grants, each larger in scale and to be more engaged. The success rate picked up. Shell Foundation intensified the change, which increased the success rate further.



Only by knowing its success rate could Shell Foundation see that it needed to change. Only by continually tracking its success rate did it know whether the change was helping or hindering. This analysis is strikingly easy. It’s virtually as simple as this:

- At the point at which a grant is made, write down what constitutes success for that grant, when you expect that success to be evident, and what will indicate whether it has succeeded. For example, a grant may aim to provide 20 more teachers. If training them takes two years, then success may be evidence in three years’ time because that allows enough time to see if they remain in post. The indicator to use after three years is simply the number of new teachers who are still there.
- At the point that the success should be evident, go look at the indicators: in our example, go count the number of teachers.
- Based on those indicators, record the grant as having ‘succeeded’, ‘did OK’ or ‘failed’. (Of course, this grade can be overridden in extreme situations, such as if the teachers didn’t get trained because the charity got side-tracked by unexpectedly discovering a cure for cancer.)

Grants vary hugely in their purpose, and this analysis does not pretend that all purposes are equivalent. All it does is look at whether a grant has succeeded *in its own terms*. It therefore provides a rudimentary metric of success. At a rather basic level, **it’s hard to argue that a funder is succeeding if barely any of its grants succeed.**

Why is this useful?

It’s hard to overstate the value of a success metric. For example, consider the simple question of whether a funder should be hands-on with grantees or not. People have many opinions about this and there are many articles and conference speeches on it: but none of this is actual data, so nobody

currently knows the answer. By contrast, tracking our success rate *would* answer it: we could compare the success rate of a big enough group of hands-on grants with that of hands-off grants which are similar enough and in sufficiently similar circumstances to be a valid control group.

Tracking this success rate enables funders to evaluate management choices. Is grant success affected by training the grant officers? By the number of grants managed by each grant officer? By the grant officers' background? By involving external advisors in the decision-making process or by visiting applicants' offices? The success rate enables funders to see patterns from which they can learn. Are we getting better over time at supporting advocacy work? Why are some of our programmes more successful than others? **Without any metric of success, a funder has literally no idea whether its strategy is working.**

The suggestion and subtleties

We suggest that funders track the simple measure of whether each grant succeeds on its own terms. Of course the fruits of some grants take a long time to appear. In order to generate some insight from these cases in the meantime, take a view after (say) 2-3 years about whether the work seems to be on track, using interim measures.

We further suggest that funders publish their success rate along with details of their operational model, as Shell Foundation has done. This need not (and probably should not) identify the grantees, but should include details of how the funder operates. This will enable us all to learn which models of giving work well, in what circumstances they work, and which should be avoided.

Shell Foundation published its data in a report on its first ten years:

'This report was triggered by a simple question: "Has our performance to date in achieving scale been good, average or poor when compared with our peers?" Given the lack of other published information around performance – including both success and failure – from peer organisations, this proved to be a very difficult question to answer. That is surprising given the billions of dollars managed by foundations.'

Surprising indeed.

Risk and the right answer

What proportion of grants *should* succeed? This too, nobody yet knows.

Funders often take risks by supporting work which might fail. And rightly so: in the words of Franklin Thomas, former president of the huge Ford Foundation, charitable money can be 'the research and development arm of society'. Measuring a success rate doesn't preclude this, for two reasons. First, suppose there's a new idea of giving children breakfast at school so that empty bellies don't distract them from learning, and you fund the world's first pilot breakfast club. Suppose that it doesn't work*: children don't come or the food all gets stolen. Is that a failure? No: the pilot aimed to establish whether the club is feasible. If the pilot is conclusive, it has succeeded. (In which case, share the story: see page 11.) Experiments only fail if they are inconclusive. And second, some initiatives will genuinely fail, and clearly identifying them can show what distinguishes them from those which succeed. Venture capitalists expect some investments to fail, yet have clear definitions of success which show which those are.

* In fact, breakfast clubs do appear to work. We're just using this as an illustration.

2. Is the patient getting better?

Is your goal being achieved? Is biodiversity increasing around the lake? Is malaria declining?

Although progress on a goal doesn't prove that any particular funder (or charity or anybody else) is doing well, assessing a funder's impact without looking at whether its goals are being achieved is perhaps rather odd. A recent survey found that 75 per cent of foundation CEOs think there has been moderate to no progress in their areas of interest, though fully 90 per cent of them think that their foundation has been moderately or significantly successful. It's hard to see how both views can be true.

The suggestion

Often, funders can use objective data to 'take the temperature' of their goals. Relevant data may be available from third-party sources, including: mortality and morbidity statistics; surveys of public attitudes to social, environmental and international development issues; studies of public behaviours such as recycling, charitable giving and divorce rates; macro-economic data about employment rates, wages and crime statistics; scientific data such as air pollution, noise pollution and the influence of pharmaceutical companies in published clinical trials; statistics on voter turnout, MPs' commercial interests and voting records. Other times call for bespoke data, if public data do not capture it.

Why is this useful?

Because these data show whether the funder's goal is still relevant, and may show other issues to prioritise. For example, the data may show that air pollution from cars is indeed declining but that pollutants from factories is increasing, which may prompt the funder to change her focus. Similarly with health: perhaps malaria incidence is increasing in some regions faster than in others, so some resources should be diverted. The data are also a good external check on our sense of achievement: it is easy to get caught up in the process of funding at the expense of checking that the problem is still there.

Of course, these data show nothing about causes or attribution. They do not provide *the best* conceivable measure of a funder's impact but are a *good* and useful tool to give a sense of direction, prevent wild over-claiming and ensure a relevant focus.

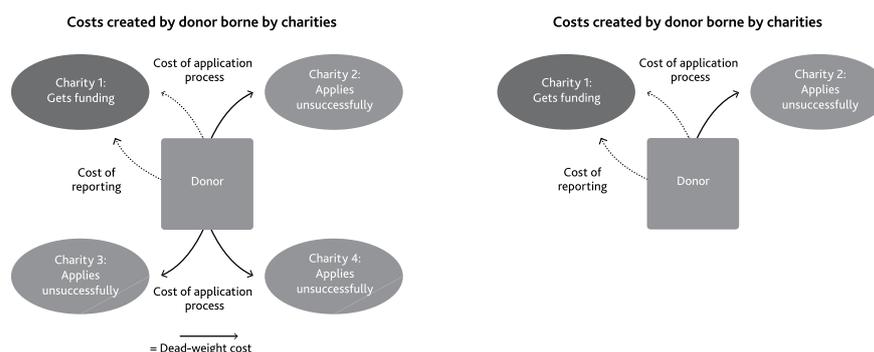
3. Could we release hidden funds by streamlining our processes?

Responsible funders want to maximise the amount of their funds which is spent on productive work. Unavoidably some funds are consumed when charities (and other organisations) apply to funders and report to them on their work.* These processes can be pretty expensive. On application processes, we know that the cost of raising funds by charities is 20-40 per cent, against only 7-10 per cent for businesses. On reporting, charities spend around £600m pa reporting to government funders, and around another £1bn pa reporting to charitable foundations. These costs are largely *created* by funders, but are not *borne* by funders and hence not visible to them. These costs are however real and ultimately hurt beneficiaries by consuming funds which could otherwise be used on ‘real work’.

There seems to be considerable scope for releasing funds for ‘real work’. On application processes, anecdotes about avoidable duplication and wastage imply that streamlining could perhaps reduce charities’ costs by 10-20 per cent across the board. On reporting processes, estimates are that 25 per cent could easily be saved, which is £400m pa.

The suggestion: ensure that your contribution is net positive!

Funders can track the costs which are created by their application and reporting processes, and thereby identify where to reduce them.



The analysis has two stages. First, consider a funder’s relationship with a single grantee. Raising and reporting on the grant will take the grantee some time, which clearly has a cost. If that cost is, say, 30 per cent of the grant value, the ‘net grant’ is only 70 per cent of its face value. There are many stories of ‘net grants’ below 50 per cent: that is, the funder’s processes consumed more than half the amount given. As a charity CEO, Giving Evidence Director Caroline Fiennes received a grant where the ‘net grant’ was about nil: i.e., dealing with the funder consumed virtually the whole grant. And there are examples of grants which are net negative – a physicist at Colombia University has several, for instance. Clearly, **at the very least, a funder needs to avoid being a drain on its grantees!**

Then second, include also organisations which apply unsuccessfully. The diagram on the left above shows the costs created by a funder who supports one in four of its applicants and asks grantees for bespoke reports. BBC Children in Need was doing this. Though one in four is quite high for the industry, it meant that three quarters of applications were wasted. Strategy Director Sheila-Jane Malley says: ‘We’re painfully aware that every application which doesn’t get through was work for somebody. As a responsible organisation interested in children, we’ve begun to look systematically at how we can prevent as much of that work as possible.’ BBC Children in Need

* This analysis is valid even for funders which don’t have a formal application process or which don’t solicit or accept applications as such. Processes in which funders proactively seek grantees also create costs.

is clarifying its guidance still further in order to reduce unsuccessful applications and hence save charities money, moving towards the diagram on the right. You can see how, taking account of failed applications, **a funder can be a net drain on its sector even if each grant is net positive.**

Looking at it the other way round, if a funders' processes consume, say, 80 per cent of the total amount that it gives, then there's clearly an opportunity to double, triple or quadruple its impact by streamlining those processes. In the extreme case of a funder being a drain on its sector, **it can't reasonably claim any positive impact at all, irrespective of what the grantees do manage to achieve.** This explains the point made earlier, that **a funder's effect may be quite different to the sum of the work supported by its grants.**

We suggest that funders do this analysis in consultation with grantees and reject-ees. It's essential to involve them because (a) the costs aren't clear to the funder and estimates are likely to be pretty inaccurate, and (b) charities are unlikely to volunteer their views for fear of compromising future funding. Ideally the analysis would involve a group of funders in order to learn from the comparison: if you support community groups, you might like to compare your processes and costs with those of others funding similar work, and hence learn what to keep and what to change. Giving Evidence is convening funders to do this analysis on a comparative basis.

Why is this useful?

First, because the amount of money which could potentially be freed up is so large. And second, because **it helps with practical management decisions.** For example, many funders invite short applications at the first stage, though nobody actually knows whether these reduce cost. This analysis *would* show this and hence show whether and when they're a good idea. Similarly, by showing the cost of requiring annual reports, it enables funders to assess whether those reports are good value. Thus **it shows where improvements can be made.**

**'I am sorry to have wearied you with so long a letter but I
did not have time to write you a short one'**

- Blaise Pascal

By combining this analysis with the success rate analysis described above, a funder can see whether various parts of its process – first stage application forms or hands-on support for example – pay off in terms of making grants succeed. Further, by combining this analysis with grantee perceptions (discussed below), we can see whether the processes are just wasteful duplication and meddling or whether (and where) they are useful support.

This analysis helps funders see what is actually going on. Oddly, funders' perceptions of their processes – even what the stages are – can markedly differ from the process which recipients perceive.

The subtleties

We are not suggesting that all application and reporting processes be eradicated. Some are clearly necessary and helpful, as borne out by our own experience as grant-maker and grant-receiver and that of many others. Furthermore, grantees at different lifestages vary in the amount of support which is valuable.

Of course, there are some costs incurred by charities 'voluntarily' for which a funder cannot reasonably be held responsible: applications which are wildly outside the funder's stated guidelines, or reports which are much more elaborate than required. On some costs – such as costs which charities incur in researching funders and getting to know them – it's not clear how much to attribute to the funder. We endeavour to resolve this over time.

4. What do our grantees think of us?

'I'm not aware of any impact the Foundation is having in the field or community.'

'They have been approachable, practical and direct in their suggestions.'

'Foundation was unreasonable ... asking us to collect data a year after the funding finished. We have no money to pay [for] this work.'

'We do not know who our project officer is ... since we have received no communications from them at all.'

Grantees liking a funder is no guarantee that the funder is successful. But since most funders work through grantees, those grantees are a crucial constituency and their views give a *good* insight into the funder's performance.

The suggestion: Safety first

Is that funders gather these views from grantees (and possibly reject-ees and others in their sectors), and heed the insights. This needs to be done carefully because charities depend on funders for their survival and ability to serve their beneficiaries. They rationally fear biting the hand that feeds them, or even criticising it. The stakes are high for them in giving feedback, so they should normally be allowed to give their views anonymously.

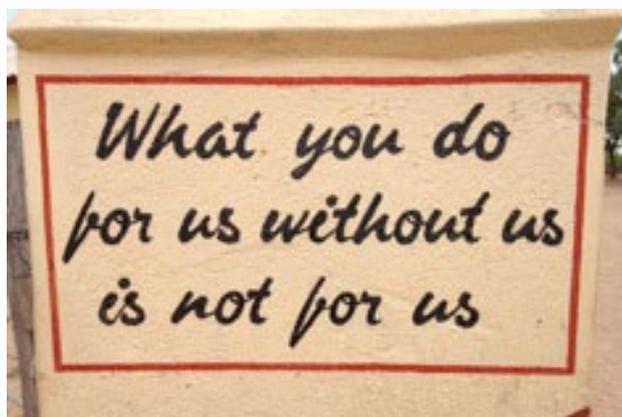
'From 1987 to 1999, Paul Brest was the dean of Stanford Law School. A day hardly went by when students, faculty or alumni didn't tell him what he was doing wrong – and at least once in a while they were right. Then in 2000, he became president of the Hewlett Foundation [a large US grant-making foundation]. By all external signals, within a matter of months, he underwent a personal transformation and achieved perfection!'

Paul Brest and Hal Harvey, both formerly of the Hewlett Foundation

Why is this useful?

Because it enables funders to learn from the insights of their primary customers, the grantees. Whereas in business, there is a clear feedback mechanism – if people don't like a product, they stop buying it – in philanthropy, there is none. Grantees will put up with expensive processes (as discussed) and bad treatment from funders because they have little choice.

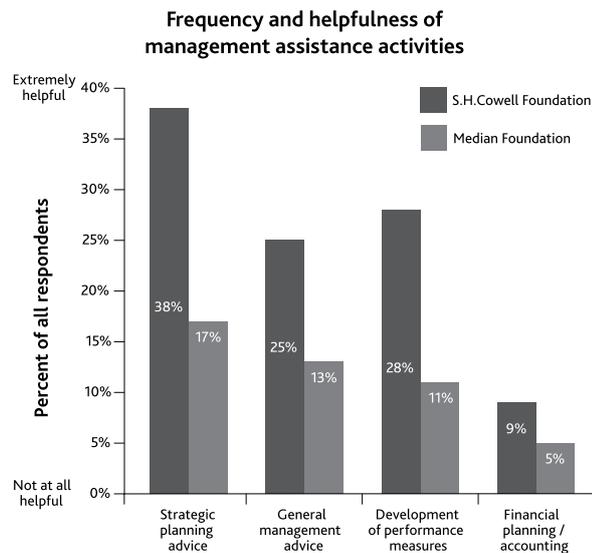
These 'feedback loops', through which the providers of a service hear the views of people who receive it, have been shown to improve services in the public sector, civil sector and health. Funders must go out of their way to listen to grantees and respond to the feedback. Several organisations



Spotted on a school wall in Zimbabwe and tweeted by Melinda Gates

help funders to do this, and are also involved in creating feedback loops to involve beneficiaries and citizens in international development work and public sector services. Feedback Labs is a consortium of organisations working in this area.

The US-based Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) created the Grantee Perception Report for this reason. It is a confidential, third-party survey of charities which solicits their views about donors' processes, their use of non-financial support, clarity and timeliness of communications, the quality of the relationship, and so on. The quotes above are from various funders' Grantee Perception Reports. CEP now has a substantial dataset from surveys of many grantees through which a funder can compare its performance with that of many peers. Below, for instance, is a peer-comparison of the S. H. Cowell Foundation on one aspect of performance, the management assistance provided to grantees.



Other organisations create similar feedback loops. Keystone Accountability works on two levels of what it calls 'constituency voice': enabling funders to hear the views of grantees, and enabling operating charities to hear the views of citizens and beneficiaries. It has a free app, through which funders or operating organisations can confidentially consult grantees, citizens or other important stakeholders.

Learn and share

Again, these insights can be useful within a funder's organisation. Many funders publish the (anonymous) feedback from grantees and the learnings from them externally, and find this a useful way of building their own resolve to apply them and to bolster the field.

5. What have we learned?

'For any organization to thrive, it is imperative that there be time to step back and reflect: to ask what we can be doing better or differently, and what we're missing. We have institutionalized these moments of reflection in learning meetings, annual reflection discussions, and other opportunities where we can step back and consider our work and its impact.'

Luis A. Ubiñas, former President, Ford Foundation

There is always a queue at a funder's door. Despite the understandable urge to deal with new requests, new issues and new possibilities, funders can find value in taking stock. Some, like the Ford Foundation, have built it into their cycle. And here lies the pain, because here a funder realises and admits its errors.

The suggestion

We recommend that any donor periodically reflects, to identify lessons and specific changes to make.

Furthermore, we further suggest publicly sharing those tales – perhaps of programmes and styles of giving which don't work. Those stories are a valuable source of learning, preventing other people from falling into the same traps. There is nothing to be ashamed of: funders pride themselves on taking risks and being innovative, and just by virtue of sheer numbers, some programmes won't work out.

'We were being too passive in not sharing our grantmaking portfolio, experience, and strategies with other foundations... We thought that if our grantees are doing good stuff, people would hear about it, and that's enough... But we found that we needed to be more proactive.'

Stewart Hudson, President of the Emily Hall Tremain Foundation,
a \$100 million family foundation in Connecticut

Looking at it the other way, suppose that somebody at the opposite end of the country wants to start giving in a serious way. What could they learn from your experience? Unless you publish lessons and data, the answer is 'not a lot'. All your experience and learning would be invisible – inconsequential – to them.

Engineers Without Borders, a Canadian NGO, publishes an annual Failure Report in which engineers recount tales of failure and the lessons they learned. It explains the rationale as: 'Engineers are open about failure: it's pretty clear if your bridge fell down.' Engineers Without Borders finds value in identifying lessons, seeing the patterns, and the accountability which comes from publishing.

Giving Evidence is currently working with a funder to publish an 'honesty report' about a programme which worked less well than hoped. It documents the problems, some of which translate readily to other funders' work and are perfectly avoidable.

Why is this useful?

Medicine suffers from a bad case of 'publication bias', in which studies showing treatments to have a positive result are more likely to be published than are studies showing no effect or a negative effect. It's thought that around half of all trials are unpublished: given the commercial interests of pharmaceutical companies which fund most trials, it's not hard to guess which half. As a result, 'the true effects of loads of prescribed medicines are essentially unknown', according to epidemiologist Dr Ben Goldacre.

Philanthropy can avoid the same fate – of having loads of innovations and styles of giving, the true effects of which are essentially unknown. Tales of failure and challenges, however inglorious, teach us a great deal. They spare us from reinventing the wheel – using resources which could have been used to help beneficiaries – and, like all the suggestions in this paper, help us all to achieve more.

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