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Center on Philanthropy
and Civil Society
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Global Innovation for Impact Lab

GIIL Research Approach

How does research start at GIIL? In general, our research comes from listening to questions that organizations struggle with. For example, about 10 years ago, the Rockefeller Foundation asked us: How can established social sector organizations keep innovating and what does our established knowledge base on this topic look like? That question sent us on an exploration of ´relevant literatures and rich field data and generated several reports, scholarly and practice-oriented articles, and our award-winning book "Innovation and Scaling for Impact".

Small and steady wins the race

But often, we start very small - we stumble over an issue that keeps bugging us or that keeps coming up in conversations. We then interrogate our own field data to see if we can shape the idea into something interesting that is worth exploring. At that stage, we have some intuition that guides a systematic search of scholarly literature: What have others written about this topic? Often, we create intermediate research outputs in the form of a literature synthesis or short articles. Publishing ideas at an early stage in SSIR allows us to gather the voices and experiences of other researchers and organizations that get their hands dirty in the real world. Importantly, the act of writing forces us to reflect carefully and systematically about our assumptions and hypotheses. An important next step is usually the development of a research case study that focuses on an organization and follows its decisions and their consequences over time.

An example - Looking at homelessness from a system perspective

An example of this process is a recent case study on the evolution of homelessness as a social problem in the US since the 1960s. The idea that triggered this work revolved around the question: Could homelessness be a context to discover insights into the validity and usefulness of system perspectives? The adoption of system perspectives in the philanthropic and development sectors signals a shift from solving social problems to intervening in social systems that give rise to and keep recreating social problems. We have just finished the work on the homelessness case study and now we need to decide: Is this perspective a productive basis for a research project? Research outcomes are uncertain - we never know whether or when we may create important insights. As a small lab, we need to load the dice in our favor and a thorough deliberation of this decision is critical. Currently, we are discussing the research case with organizations that we featured in the case to unearth important perspectives that we may have missed. But if our intuition is right, then we will be busy studying organizations involved in addressing homelessness for some time.

Research - An innovation process

In many ways, research is an innovation process. You start with an idea, explore uncertainties and possibilities, test, discard, and replace assumptions and manage the emotional roller coaster that lures you into giving up too soon. We only fail with research or innovation if we give up to soon. If the underlying idea or problem is important, then you need to keep going and learn as quickly as possible to translate uncertainties into knowledge. Eventually you will succeed and create research insights that matter or innovative products that solve important problems. At that stage, the critical question for us as researcher is: Can we make our findings useful for practice? And for the innovator, the critical question is: Can you scale your innovation? At GIIL, we belief strongly that investments in research and innovation need to be justified by making a difference in the real world or they remain fancy luxuries.