

Future of Global Health Initiatives: moving forward on an effective and impactful research and learning agenda

Reflections from the FGHI Research and Learning Task Team

September 2023

Summary

In Summer 2022, the co-chairs of the *Future of Global Health Initiatives* established a Research and Learning Task Team (RLTT) to ensure the wider FGHI process was supported by a process of research and learning.

Over the last 8 months, Task Team membersⁱ have provided inputs to a Wellcome-commissioned research study, and shared insight, analysis and case studies relevant to the FGHI process. This culminated in the final report of the *Reimagining the Future of Global Health Initiatives* study, and a summary of RLTT discussions to date, which were shared with the FGHI Steering Group and other key partners in August 2023ⁱⁱ.

In September 2023, the Research and Learning Task Team met for the final time to collectively reflect on the outstanding learning agenda around optimising global health initiatives support for countries' progress towards UHC, and what pathways and mechanisms could be used to take this forward.

The discussion invited participants to respond to three provocations:

- *What would a relevant, responsive and impactful learning agenda look like going forward?*
- *What could the learning agenda look like for GHIs in the future?*
- *What pathways or mechanisms exist to embed and strengthen learning?*

These important questions surface well known challenges, and participants acknowledged the need to build on existing conversations around related issues such as maximising positive synergies and aid effectiveness. Building on these foundations, RLTT members highlighted the need for a long-term learning agenda that is truly inclusive and informed by diverse perspectives and identified several priority areas for further research. These reflections are summarised in this note, to inform ongoing FGHI deliberations and future work by partners.

Priority areas for further learning

Task Team members identified a number of key areas where further exploration and learning should be prioritised.

- **Improving understanding of financial flows:** Greater understanding of how money is being invested by GHIs would aid decision-making, particularly when it comes to how and when to pursue 'pooled' or more integrated financing. It

would also make it easier to build up a systematic evidence base on the impact of GHIs themselves. However, analysis is currently undermined by a lack of transparency around funding.

- **Building a common understanding of health system strengthening (HSS):** Better understanding of which activities constitute as HSS, and how to measure and account for these, is needed to ensure donors, GHIs and other actors including NGOs can better support efforts with greater consistency and effectiveness.
- **Embedding political economy analysis (PEA):** Strengthening PEA will be key in identifying strategies to better overcome long-term barriers to change. In particular, strengthening collective understanding of the factors that affect country, GHI and donor risk appetite and behaviours, will be useful.
- **Strengthening learning from current practice:** There is a collective need to better learn from experience in order to build best practice in areas such as:
 - **Effective use of pooled funding:** understanding the practical challenges in previous attempts to pool funding; where this works best, and why.
 - **Identifying key ingredients for effective country leadership:** understanding the key ingredients in ensuring effective country-leadership and the role of GHIs in supporting this.
 - **Integration:** learning from feasible integration models, and current knowledge about how integration works in practice.
- **Ensuring informed decision making on targets and trade-offs:** System level analysis is needed to inform the identification of progress and performance targets, and to minimise unexpected consequences. In particular, research should support countries to strengthen understanding of the trade-offs between rapid programmatic wins and sustainable health system strengthening, and how to navigate these.

Key enablers, challenges and opportunities

RLTT members discussed a number of particular challenges related to the evaluation of GHI programmes and welcomed ongoing work by GHI evaluation committees to document and address these.

Challenges include:

- **A small pool of evaluators:** Technical and capacity hurdles mean that a small number of organisations are relied on to undertake evaluation services for GHIs and the UN system more broadly.
- **Independence of the GHI evaluation process:** Many actors in the current evaluation ecosystem rely on repeat business, which can affect the nature of their critique as it is not in their interests to provide overly critical assessments. There is also a need to ensure GHI evaluations are complemented by independent academic work, that scrutinises donors as well as GHIs themselves.
- **Timelines for evaluation:** Learning and analysis are constrained by the imperative to align with GHI replenishment models.

Task Team members also highlighted a range of factors and potential pathways that will enable a more relevant, responsive and impactful learning agenda.

These include:

- **Improved transparency:** Better availability of data, particularly on financial flows, is critical to effective research, analysis and learning.
- **Strong data systems:** Effective and resilient country systems for routine data collection will be a key foundation of a strong learning agenda.
- **Stronger local leadership of evaluation and learning:** Learning and evaluation should be based in, and feed into, country-led learning systems, while also accounting for the fact that not all governments reflect and serve the needs of all of their populations. Action from GHIs, donors and other partners is needed to move the centre of gravity away from academic institutions based in the Global North, towards implementing countries and communities.
- **Rethinking who defines success and how:** Implementing countries and communities should be given space to interrogate how GHIs measure success, with more critical consideration of what results matter.
- **Consistent documentation and knowledge sharing:** In general, there needs to be better shared understanding of how GHI activity is delivered, what works and why. There are too many past efforts where learning hasn't been openly and consistently shared.
- **Alignment with the needs of policy and decision-makers:** The research and learning agenda should be intentional in serving decision makers at different levels, including GHI governing bodies, donors and implementing countries.

Looking forward

Continued research and learning will be critical to the effective evolution of the GHI ecosystem and should extend beyond individual organisational reflection to include ecosystem-wide analysis, and beneficiary- and country-led learning. RLTT members look forward to further exploring the ideas outlined in this note, and to working with other partners in the FGHI process to ensure the operationalisation of any outcomes is supported by a robust, inclusive learning agenda. In doing so they will consider how to utilise and build on existing learning platforms and mechanism, such as the Global Symposium on Health Systems Research in Japan in 2024.

ⁱ Research & Learning Task Team – FGHI. [online] Available at: <https://futureofghis.org/about/research-learning-task-team> [Accessed 30 Aug. 2023].

ⁱⁱ *Reimagining the Future of Global Health Initiatives study* – FGHI. [online] Available at: <https://futureofghis.org/research-other-inputs/reimagining-the-future-of-global-health-initiatives-study/> [Accessed 30 Aug. 2023] and The FGHI Research & Learning Task Team's Summary Note of Contributions – FGHI. [online] Available at: <https://futureofghis.org/research-other-inputs/the-fghi-research-learning-task-teams-summary-note-of-contributions/> [Accessed 30 Aug. 2023].