



AUSTRALIAN  
COUNCIL  
FOR  
INTERNATIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT



RESEARCH FOR  
DEVELOPMENT  
IMPACT NETWORK

A collaboration between  
the Australian Council for  
International Development  
and Australian universities



## **Demonstrating outcomes and impact across different scales**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

May 2018

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## About ACFID

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) is the peak body for Australian non-government organisations (NGOs) involved in international development and humanitarian action. Our vision is of a world where all people are free from extreme poverty, injustice and inequality and where the earth's finite resources are managed sustainably. Our purpose is to lead and unite our members in action for a just, equitable and sustainable world.

Founded in 1965, ACFID currently has 125 members and 21 affiliates operating in more than 95 developing countries. The total revenue raised by ACFID's membership from all sources amounts to \$1.9 billion (2016), \$930 million of which is raised from over 1.5 million Australians (2016). ACFID's members range between large Australian multi-sectoral organisations that are linked to international federations of NGOs, to agencies with specialised thematic expertise, and smaller community based groups, with a mix of secular and faith based organisations.

ACFID members must comply with the ACFID Code of Conduct, a voluntary, self-regulatory sector code of good practice that aims to improve international development and humanitarian action outcomes and increase stakeholder trust by enhancing the transparency, accountability and effectiveness of signatory organisations. Covering 9 Quality Principles, 32 Commitments and 90 compliance indicators, the Code sets good standards for program effectiveness, fundraising, governance and financial reporting. Compliance includes annual reporting and checks. The Code has an independent complaints handling process.

Further information can be found at [www.acfid.asn.au](http://www.acfid.asn.au).

## About the Research for Development Impact Network

The Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network is a collaboration between the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) and Australian universities. It is a network of practitioners, researchers and evaluators working in international development with the objective of linking quality research, policy and practice for impact in international development.

The Network began in 2009 and grew out of a collective desire to widen debate on international development and to strengthen collaboration between academics and members of ACFID. Since this time, the Network has continued to grow and promote positive relationships and connections between ACFID members and universities, with the overall goal of supporting collaboration and understanding across actors within the Australian development sector.

Further information can be found at [www.rdinetwork.org.au](http://www.rdinetwork.org.au).

## Acknowledgements

This Executive Summary summarises the research report prepared by Jo Hall, commissioned by the Development Practice Committee (DPC) of ACFID and RDI Network, available at [www.acfid.asn.au/resources](http://www.acfid.asn.au/resources).

ACFID and RDI Network acknowledge the input of member agencies and individuals through participation in the research. ACFID and RDI Network particularly acknowledge the contribution of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as a part of the reference group supporting this research.

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# Background

ACFID is committed to enabling its members to improve, prove and demonstrate their individual and collective effectiveness and impact. RDI Network, in turn, has objectives to improve the uptake and use of evidence into programming. As part of ongoing support to improve monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices in the sector, ACFID and its Development Practice Committee, together with the RDI Network, commissioned this initial research to show how evidence of outcomes and impact can be better captured, integrated and reported on across different scales of work. It intends to encourage development actors towards asking and answering new and more strategic questions about development practice, using robust and meaningful evidence.

This Executive Summary draws out the key elements of the full research report authored by Jo Hall, 'Demonstrating outcomes and impact across different scales'.

This research represents an initial undertaking from ACFID and the RDI Network to understand the potential of M&E practice to address some of the key shifts and challenges facing current development practice, and in doing so, to advance the case for applying M&E processes to capture, integrate and report outcomes and impact at different scales. These specific shifts and challenges are outlined below, and are associated with changes in the development context, and changes in development practice itself.

## Context and drivers

### Changes in the development context

The aid 'landscape' has changed dramatically in recent years, as reflected in the academic literature, evolving language of practice and recent international commitments.

The international framework of global agreements driving development agendas is evolving, and contributing to the redefinition of the development context. These international agreements act as strong drivers of behaviour by various development actors, and include:

- The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005)
- The Eight principles for CSO development effectiveness (2010)
- The Sustainable Development Goals (2015)

An overall shift from the terminology of 'aid' to 'development cooperation' recognises that the financial transactions and engagements between developed and developing countries fall into much broader categorisation. ACFID has captured some of this shift in its own definition of development effectiveness:

'promoting sustainable change which addresses the causes as well as the symptoms of poverty and marginalisation – i.e. reducing poverty and building capacity within communities, civil society and government to address their own development priorities.'<sup>1</sup>

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1 ACFID 2015. Developing an Effectiveness Framework: A toolkit for small and medium sized NGOs. Canberra.



## Changes in development practice

Alongside these shifts in the operating context, there are notable shifts occurring in development practice, namely complexity, fragmentation and the results agenda.

**Complexity:** The recognition of and response to increasing complexity of interactions, actors and politics at play in the development space demands that NGOs are:

- Developing and communicating a compelling narrative
- Adopting flexible and adaptable approaches
- Developing greater risk tolerance
- Identifying and supporting the right staff
- Brokering spaces for enhanced collaboration<sup>2</sup>

**Fragmentation:** In addition to greater complexity, increasing fragmentation of aid augments the administrative burden on developing countries. The combination of complexity and fragmentation demands greater flexibility and adaptability on the part of development actors. It also means there are fewer pre-defined results, and mixed approaches to M&E are essential to take account of both the politics of development and the politics of evaluation<sup>3</sup>.

**Results agenda:** M&E of development efforts have always been important but the growing focus on the results agenda (prompted by the Paris Declaration) has increased demand and formalisation of these activities considerably over the last decade. This has been accompanied by significant investments and a substantial workforce of expert M&E practitioners and consultants adding to the existing field of development actors.

In combination, these shifts and challenges in context and practice outlined above put forward a compelling case for development actors to be capturing, integrating and reporting on outcomes across scales.

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<sup>2</sup> MENOCAL, A. R. 2014. Getting real about politics: From thinking politically to working differently. Overseas Development Institute.

<sup>3</sup> ROCHE, C. & KELLY, L. 2012. The Evaluation of Politics and the Politics of Evaluation. Developmental Leadership Program.



# The need to measure outcomes at different scales

In consultation with monitoring and evaluation practitioners from 11 Australian NGOs, and other stakeholders including consultants and representatives from DFAT and academia, it was determined that there are multiple and complementary reasons for capturing, integrating and reporting on outcomes and impact at and across different scales<sup>4</sup>. These include:

- To help NGOs better communicate their individual or collective significance, centrality and distinctive contribution (as discussed below).
- To demonstrate that NGOs are legitimate development partners, on an equal but different footing to other development partners, and help demonstrate their strategic 'value-add'.
- To help in influencing other development actors, and for advocacy, developing social movements and social change.
- For learning, within and between NGOs and other partners; to increase effectiveness.
- For accountability, to demonstrate and prove NGO work and help secure funding from institutional and public donors.
- Efficient pooling of resources and being able to deal in longer time frames needed to demonstrate impact.

NGOs have a distinctive role to play in development that has traditionally been poorly documented or celebrated and has not suited a results based assessment framework. This role constitutes: capacity development, government cooperation, national and international advocacy, network-building and scaling up of small-scale approaches that work.

Kelly and Chapman note that *"Donor mechanisms for performance review and assessment need to be varied to suit different aid delivery mechanisms. For NGOs in Australia, this means an understanding of how organisations combine their principles and program approaches with practice to lead to effective outcomes"*<sup>5</sup>.

Some consider the significance of the NGOs is not in their individual work empowering the poor or delivering services, but in the impact of their collective effect<sup>6</sup>. NGOs are increasingly operating in collaborations, driven by agendas such as the SDGs, as well as the demands for specialised skills and resourcing. Working collaboratively inherently demands new ways of thinking about capturing results across collaborating partners and different scales of work.

Despite these new ways of operating emerging in practice over several decades, thinking 'beyond the project' in terms of reporting continues to be a major challenge for NGOs. Roger Riddell notes that some NGOs and CSOs are missing opportunities to assess "how they might contribute to making a wider and long-term impact, where their absolute and comparative advantage lies, and how they might co-operate more with others"<sup>7</sup>.

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4 ACFID. Stakeholder Workshop Demonstrating outcomes and impact across different scales, 4 May 2017 Melbourne.

5 KELLY, L. & CHAPMAN, R. 2010. A Process to Define and Enhance NGO Effectiveness. Canberra: ACFID.

6 DEGNBOL-MARTINUSSEN, J. 2003. Aid: understanding international development cooperation, New York, Zed Books p. 155.

7 RIDDELL, R. C. 2013. Assessing the Overall Impact of Civil Society on Development at the Country Level: An Exploratory Approach. Development Policy Review, 31, p.385.



# Addressing M&E at different scales

Recognising the diverse and niche functions which NGOs play in a complex development environment, it is essential that M&E can serve a range of purposes by capturing, integrating and reporting evidence of outcomes and impact at a range of scales. NGOs need to consider their M&E practice in light of their various audiences, accountabilities and learning goals, for example:

- Reporting against internal project and programming objectives
- Reporting against organisational strategy (national, global etc)
- Applying learning from involvement in collaborations and partnerships, including influencing the practice of collaborators
- Contributing to reporting against global frameworks, including the SDGs
- Providing an evidence base for advocacy efforts

Different scales beyond a typical 'project' scale might include M&E:

- across multiple projects within a single program delivered by the same agency
- across multiple programs delivered by the same agency.
- across a single program delivered by multiple agencies
- across multiple programs delivered by multiple agencies

This research examined the strengths and limitations of the three groups of approaches described in the literature to address M&E at different scales (indicators, evaluation and research). The research also drew on five case studies which showcase examples of capturing, integrating and reporting on evidence of outcomes at different scales. These cases were chosen with the intention to demonstrate a range of different scales at which NGOs have aimed to operate through their M&E efforts. Further details on strengths and limitations of specific M&E methods for working across scales, as well as a description and summary of learnings from each case study listed below are detailed in the full research report.



Case Study	M&E scale	Purpose	Approach/methods
1. Tracking Impact: An exploratory study of the wider effects of Norwegian civil society support to countries in the South	Single donor (NORAD) across all supported agencies, projects and programs in 4 case study countries	To assess the overall and wider impact of Norwegian-funded NGOs and CSOs on development and their long-term contribution to poverty reduction	Expert panel conducted an 'exploratory study'; drawing on rapid review of existing evaluations, in-country engagement with multiple stakeholders, and testing of 19 working hypotheses and 56 questions about the wider impact of the NGOs and CSOs.
2. Reach, Relationships and Results: Case Studies of Australian NGOs' work in Education	Single sector (education) across multiple projects and programs, countries and agencies	To demonstrate to DFAT the unique and necessary contribution of NGOs to education	Compilation of 19 case studies from 11 (large and small) NGOs, using a narrative synthesis drawing out key themes on the unique contribution of NGOs
3. Exploring the link between child and youth participation and development effectiveness	Single development approach (child and youth participation) across three projects, three agencies and in-country partners in three countries	To investigate the link between child and youth participation and development effectiveness	Academic partner provided conceptual framework and a common methodology and tools applied across different NGOs and country contexts
4. Australia Africa Community Engagement Scheme (AACES)	Single DFAT funding window in three sectors across eleven countries, ten agencies and in-country partners; conducting community-based interventions	To meet DFAT's accountability requirements and strengthen the program to target and serve the needs of marginalised people	Program level M&E included a set of quantitative indicators against which all NGOs reported, development of outcome statements and a program theory of change, participatory annual review workshops and peer review, and synthesis of NGO narrative reports.
5. OXFAM Australia's approach to reporting against its Strategic Plan (2014-19)	Single agency, all projects and programs	To monitor the overall performance of OXFAM Australia programs; contribute to thematic strategy, program learning and program development; and support engagement with institutional donors, supporters and the public.	Suite of products/methods including; a common reporting system against key results, six monthly portfolio analysis, desk-based synthesis of program evaluations against strategic plan, program performance reviews, strategic outcomes analysis against thematic areas, and an NGO partner survey.



# Fostering organisational buy-in

Integrating and reporting at and across different scales beyond a particular agency or ‘beyond the project’ requires high level strategic intent by the organisation, with associated commitment, processes and capabilities. However, there are conflicting demands, expectations and views which influence decisions about what might be valuable to report on across scales, as well as a continued debate about the priority of monitoring, evaluation and research in broader organisational prioritisation. This negotiation may come out in favour of the NGO’s own organisational stability and preservation.<sup>8</sup> This argument was supported by the ANGOs consulted for this report, who were mostly occupied by agency-level scales rather than country, sector or global scales<sup>9</sup>.

One barrier to thinking about M&E at different scales was identified by the ANGOs as the strong incentive of upward accountability which detracts from locally connected and relevant learning. ANGO staff feel the imperative to achieve positive results and the pressure to work in locations and with partners and clients that will bring positive results and value for money, compared with working in more marginalised areas and fostering change that is harder to bring about. The risk of failure – or a fear of scaled M&E showing ‘the wrong thing’ – juxtapose against a competitive NGO environment where organisational reputation can act as a stronger driver than learning. However, if decision makers recognise the drivers described above and the potential value that M&E across scales could offer, then greater organisational buy-in for such work may be possible.

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<sup>8</sup> HELLIKER, K. 2007. Marx, Weber and NGOs. *South African Review of Sociology*, 38, 120-133 and LISSNER, J. 1977. The Politics of Altruism: a study of the political behaviour of voluntary development agencies, Lutheran World Federation, Department of Studies.

<sup>9</sup> ACFID, 2017.

# Factors to consider in conducting M&E across scales

This research identified seven key considerations for NGOs considering undertaking an M&E approach for capturing, integrating and reporting across different scales. These considerations inform the choice of methodology as well as the required skills and resources, and the potential use of the resulting evidence.

## **Factors to consider when capturing, integrating and reporting on evidence of outcomes and impact across different scales**

- Being clear on the purpose and questions and making use of the information
- Applying fit-for-purpose methods in fit-for purpose ways
- Adopting methods and approaches that address complexity
- Considering the needs of all partners, including locally
- Capturing the distinctive contribution of the NGOs
- Not being overly complicated, technocratic or exacerbating fragmentation
- Having adequate resourcing to meet the purpose

## Being clear on the purpose and questions and making use of the information

Any exercise in capturing, integrating and reporting across different scales of work must begin with a very clear purpose and questions. The information generated must be useful and used – for example in demonstrating impact, advocacy, learning, decision-making or accountability.

Some NGOs are satisfied that making their contribution one project at a time is sufficient and there is nothing to be gained from investigating what it all adds up to. Roger Riddell however identifies the “absolute and comparative advantage” of NGOs being present in their wider and long-term impact, which demands a “beyond the project” approach<sup>10</sup>.

Selecting and implementing the most appropriate methods or combinations of methods is both a technical and political issue. If NGOs are interested in genuinely deepening their understanding of their contribution to development, and are willing to work collaboratively with others, then a more strategic approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning at and across different scales is appropriate.

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<sup>10</sup> RIDDELL, 2013 p.385.

## Applying fit-for-purpose methods in fit-for purpose ways

Form follows function and it is the purpose of the exercise in capturing, integrating and reporting across different scales of work that then determines the choice of method or methods. At a broad level, three main methods match three main purposes; (i) if the purpose involves judgement then evaluative approaches and methods should be used, (ii) if the purpose is primarily about deepening understanding then research approaches are suitable and (iii) if the purpose is about managing a portfolio then using indicators might be applied.

These distinctions are however not clear cut, and all three approaches can be used to demonstrate results either separately and (more often) in combination. Evaluation is a type of research and the methods used are largely common. Using indicators is best done as part of a performance story or in combination with evaluative or research approaches, to avoid over-simplification and potential mis-representation.

### **In Practice:**

Case Study 5 (OXFAM organisational approach) presents a clear example of effective application of a combined approach, relying on a mix of evaluative and research elements to adequately capture a whole-of-organisation view of outcomes against the Strategic Plan.

Within these broad approaches, the most fit-for-purpose method or combinations of methods need to be selected in accordance with the particular questions being asked and should be the minimum required for the purpose.

## Adopting methods and approaches that address complexity

Approaches used for integrating and reporting across different scales of work also need to address complexity, or they risk perpetuating over-simplified understandings of program logics and development and will not be useful. Addressing complexity in aid and development is not just about M&E systems, but ways of working more broadly. 'Thinking and working politically' is one stream of work that suggests different ways of working, with fewer pre-defined results, mixed approaches to M&E, and the need for enhanced collaboration.

### **In Practice:**

Case Study 4 (AACES) showcases an effective and coherent M&E of a complex, disparate program across multiple sectors, countries and agencies. A non-prescriptive approach, a common framework, and a focus on cross-cutting issues were helpful strategies to deal with the complexity of the program.

Some evaluative and research methods can address complexity while using indicators generally does not if applied on its own. Mixed methods, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches are preferred. Some qualitative methods that address complexity include ethnography, contribution analysis, realist evaluation and use of an expertpanel approach .

## Considering the needs of all partners, including locally

NGOs seem to have not concentrated heavily on strengthening local M&E systems, for example to strengthen partner civil society systems to operate within their own regulatory environments. While international development NGOs have been involved in helping both governments and NGOs develop their own civil society regulatory systems, they have been more focused on strengthening their own monitoring and evaluation systems than those of their in-country partners. Similarly, the international NGOs have been less concerned with strengthening the capacity of civil society to monitor government performance and achievement of the SDGs. This seems inconsistent with the Australian NGO commitment to build capacity within communities, civil society and government to address their own development priorities.

### **In Practice:**

Case Study 3 (child and youth participation and development effectiveness) demonstrates a comprehensive partnership approach with explicit engagement of local communities in a research project. In-country partners worked with communities to provide contextual background and to set-up the research, and local researchers were trained to carry out the research, with all partners supported by an academic organisation.

## Capturing the distinctive contribution of the NGOs

The significance of NGOs is in their distinctive contribution and the impact of their collective or collaborative effects, but their M&E systems are often narrowly based. Some NGOs have been historically progressive in promoting alternative development paradigms over the mainstream linear theories of economic development. The degree to which the distinctive contribution of NGOs is captured largely depends on the purpose and types of questions the exercise is seeking to address.

### **In Practice:**

Case Study 2 (NGO education work) reflects a synthesis exercise which featured an explicit purpose to “demonstrate ANGO’s distinctive contribution to education and how their interventions have influenced the broader education agenda in the countries.”

An important consideration in capturing the distinctive contribution of NGOs is a focus on the nature of the intervention and how this has contributed to outcomes and impact. This requires a mix of methods and approaches that not only focus on the outcomes and impact but also include some explanatory power.

## Not being overly complicated, technocratic or exacerbating fragmentation

The mechanical use of performance information for reasons of accountability and control<sup>11</sup> and the “rising tide of technocracy”<sup>12</sup> are plaguing M&E systems.

When capturing, integrating and reporting across different scales there is a risk that these characteristics will be reinforced, so a conscious effort to identify useful measures is needed. Aggregating indicators carries a particular risk – identified in a UK study of monitoring, evaluation and learning systems – which is that quantitative data is easier to store and to analyse than qualitative data<sup>13</sup>. It must be the purpose that drives the choice of method and not the means of collecting and analysing the data.

### **In Practice:**

Case Study 4 (AACES) avoided the pitfalls of fragmentation and technocracy by:

- relying on existing NGO systems;
- involving local partners in developing meaningful measures; and
- building program-level M&E systems into the program design, planning for capture at multiple levels.

## Having adequate resourcing to meet the purpose

Most of the case studies discussed in this report discuss the adequacy of resources as a major practical factor in their implementation of M&E across scales, in terms of staff time and capacity as well as funds. The staff time needed for collaborating and coordinating within agencies and across agencies should not be underestimated. The technical complexities mean that involvement of specialist evaluators and researchers is likely to hold some benefits, in addition to building those capacities among ANGOs and their local partners. The capacity for this type of work is less likely to exist at the local level where the focus is on implementation. There are practical and political challenges in obtaining such investment especially if it sits outside of project funding.

Pooling of resources is a useful way to increase the resources available for a collaborative exercise and to enable smaller NGOs to participate. There may be possibilities for smaller NGOs to identify opportunities for adding strategic value (e.g. additional agility/flexibility) to collaborations with larger NGOs.

11 VÄHÄMÄKI, J., SCHMIDT, M. & MOLANDER, J. 2011. Review: results based management in development cooperation. Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, Stockholm. and EYBEN, R. 2015. Uncovering the politics of evidence and results. Politics of results and evidence in international development: Playing the Game to Change the Rules, 19-38.

12 BANKS, N., HULME, D. & EDWARDS, M. 2015. NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort? World Development, 66, p.708.

13 ITAD 2014. Investing in monitoring, evaluation and learning: Issues for NGOs to consider. UK: Big Lottery Fund, Bond, Comic Relief, NIDOS and DFID.

# Conclusion and next steps

Capturing, integrating and reporting on evidence of outcomes and impact across different scales in this research is about a more strategic approach to measuring development effectiveness by Australian NGOs. It requires high level strategic intent by the organisation, with associated commitment, processes and capabilities. It also involves both political and technical challenges. In some ways, starting with monitoring, evaluation and learning across different scales is premature because it makes most sense to do this when agencies are programming across different scales. However, there is a chicken-and-egg element to this – if the benefits of capturing, integrating and reporting across different scale are visible and obvious, it can help drive programming behaviours.

The following three recommendations are made within the full report<sup>14</sup>:

1. Agencies should consider adopting a more strategic approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning and consider the seven factors in any exercise involving Australian NGOs to capture, integrate and report on outcomes and impact across different scales
2. ACFID or RDI Network should establish a resourced community of practice for monitoring, evaluation and learning practitioners. This group should take forward this report by:
  - a) Sharing experience and expertise about monitoring, evaluation and learning, particularly around methods that address complexity
  - b) Capturing lessons, sharing insights and supporting existing or proposed member initiatives to learn from and demonstrate the value of capturing, integrating and reporting on outcomes and impact across different scales
3. DFAT should consider ways to support good practice in capturing, integrating and reporting on outcomes and impact across different scales by ANGOs, including in partnerships and collaborations. These ways might include designing its support to ANGOs in ways that support collaboration rather than competition, and recognising the full costs of monitoring, evaluation and learning.

Responding to these recommendations ACFID, its Development Practice Committee and the RDI Network will support a body of work over the next few years, commencing with holding co-designing workshops in 2018 with practitioners engaged in learning, evidence and adaptation. The aim will be to create a shared understanding around where we are now; where we want to be; what is already going on that we can build on; where our sector is ahead or behind; and how we will fill gaps and share knowledge – towards a broader aim of achieving greater development effectiveness.

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<sup>14</sup> Available from: <https://acfid.asn.au/resources>.



# ACFID Member List

As at May 2018

## Full Members:

ACC International Relief  
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ActionAid Australia  
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Engineers without Borders  
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Food Water Shelter  
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Islamic Relief Australia  
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SeeBeyondBorders  
Sight For All  
So They Can  
Sport Matters  
Surf Aid International  
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TEAR Australia  
Transform Aid International (incorporating Baptist World Aid)  
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united against poverty

ACFID unites Australia's non-government aid and international development organisations to strengthen their collective impact against poverty.

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RESEARCH FOR  
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