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FIRST CONSULT

Monitoring and Evaluation in Development Programming

The Quest to Harness 718,000 Jobs

Authored by Robel Daniel, MERL Lead

A Series from the BRIDGES Knowledge Compendium

THE BRIDGES PROGRAMME

2019-2024

20
24

About the Mastercard Foundation

The Mastercard Foundation is a registered Canadian charity and one of the largest foundations in the world. It works with visionary organizations to advance education and financial inclusion to enable young people in Africa and Indigenous youth in Canada to access dignified and fulfilling work. Established in 2006 through the generosity of Mastercard when it became a public company, the Foundation is an independent organization separate from the company, with offices in Toronto, Kigali, Accra, Nairobi, Kampala, Lagos, Dakar, and Addis Ababa. Its policies, operations, and program decisions are determined by the Foundation's Board of Directors and leadership.

For more information on the Foundation, please visit www.mastercardfdn.org

20
24

About the BRIDGES Programme

First Consult

BRIDGES is a five-year programme (2019-2024) aimed at creating and supporting 530,000 youth jobs, mostly for women. It's implemented by First Consult in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation. The Programme focuses on the manufacturing sector, covering all regions and city administrations to address unemployment in Ethiopia. BRIDGES supports both self- and wage-employment, targeting unemployed youth and micro, small and medium enterprises, to provide them with demand-based skilling, information, mindset training, linkage, capacity building and access to finance. BRIDGES delivers this support in collaboration with its enabling partners including public and private organizations.

About the BRIDGES Knowledge Compendium

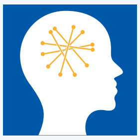
The BRIDGES Programme has designed and implemented over 35 interventions in a wide variety of sectors, from fishing to mining and furniture making, addressing complex challenges young people face related to access to finance, information, the right mindset, and skills. In so doing, the Programme leads and intervention managers often found themselves off the beaten track of youth job creation and support in Ethiopia. In this Compendium, ten senior and long-serving members of the BRIDGES team author eight titles, personally reflecting on their journey of trying to meet the quantitative and qualitative targets set for their interventions against the limitations of budget, program design and external factors, sometimes failing, often succeeding and sometimes somewhere in between. The knowledge pieces were peer reviewed by other team members in First Consult and finalized after multiple iterations following discussion and deliberation.

01. Navigating Challenges and Maximizing Opportunities: Reflections on Leading Half a Million-Youth Job Support Programme by Henok Tenna, Programme Lead

02. Unlocking Finance for Youths and MSMEs: A2F BRIDGES Journey by Getachew Mekonin, Access to Finance Lead

03. Creating Jobs for Young Women Can Be Challenging but Doable: A Mixed Approach by Semir Mohammednur, Enterprise Development Lead

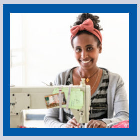
04. Layering Up for Impact: Reflections on the BRIDGES Journey by Wengel Tessema, Deputy Programme Lead



05. It’s All in the Head! How Mindset Training Unlocked Young People’s Potential to Work by Etalem Engida and Habtamu Ertro, Enterprise Development Lead and former Senior Intervention Manager

06. Unleashing Digital Potential: Empowering Youth through Inclusive Job Creation by Dawit Alem, Intervention Manager

07. TVT as an Engine for Job Creation by Woldemichael Solomon and Melaknesh Ayele, Intervention Manager and former Workforce Development Lead, respectively



08. Monitoring and Evaluation in Programming: The Quest to Harness 718,000 Jobs by Robel Daniel, MERL Lead, BRIDGES

8

Monitoring and Evaluation in Programming

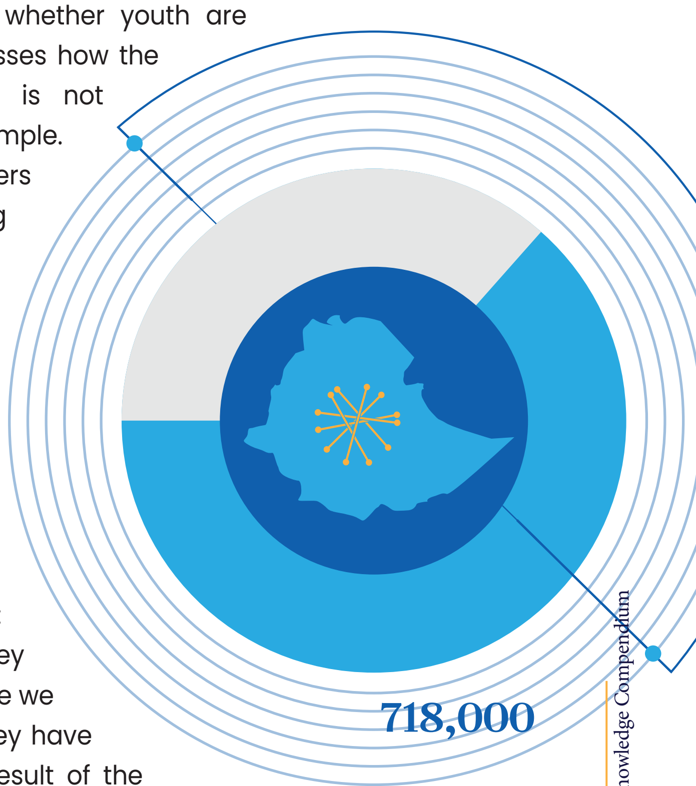
The Quest to Harness 718,000 Jobs

Robel Daniel, MERL Lead

From finance and construction to gig workers and furniture makers: The diversity of job market interventions with which the monitoring and evaluation team had to keep up

BRIDGES has a very diverse set of interventions. This stems from two reasons; one is that BRIDGES is made up of four partially interrelated, partially distinct pillars (employment linkage, enterprise development, enterprise competitiveness, and access to finance) that could each be a standalone programme in its own right. The second reason is that we follow a portfolio approach. This means we engage wherever there is an opportunity to support jobs regardless of the sector, geography, or implementation modality. This approach takes the team through an interesting journey where one day, we are approving an intervention on gig work, and the next day, it could be food processing, composting, or furniture-making. The diversity kept things interesting as we were all eager to see what idea would be presented for approval at the next Investment Committee[9] (IC) meeting.

While not knowing what's coming next is exciting but also a cause for concern. As the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) Lead sitting on the IC, beyond the feasibility of the intervention, I'm always thinking about how my team will be able to measure jobs credibly. Jobs can materialise in two ways, either through self-employment or wage employment. The measurement process traces whether youth are engaged in one of the two types of employment and assesses how the intervention contributed to the outcome. This exercise is not straightforward for each intervention. Let me give you an example. One intervention works on building the capacity of gig workers and enrolling them onto a digital platform. After being onboarded onto the platform, the participants get notifications on their phones when a client requires their service. Now, here comes an interesting question: how often does the gig worker need to get paid for MERL to consider this a job? Let me give you another example. One of the biggest interventions in BRIDGES is a digital skilling, information-sharing, and job-matching platform called Awaqi. We have over 500,000 followers on multiple social media platforms and around 50,000 subscribers for the online training provided by Awaqi. Here is the interesting part: do we have to meet these subscribers in person to verify they are real, or is their digital presence enough? How do we ensure we are avoiding double counting? How do we track whether they have acquired new work or improved their existing work as a result of the engagement on the platform? These, among many others, are the questions that run through my head as I look across the table at the intervention manager, excitedly explaining their new idea.



[9] The Investment Committee includes the Programme Lead, the four pillar leads, the MERL Lead, and the Communications Lead, each with a vote that decides whether an intervention gets launched or not following the presentation of the idea by the intervention manager.

Managing big data
When I heard the programme target, I felt sorry for the intervention managers, but later, I started to feel sorry for myself.

BRIDGES aimed to reach 718,000 youth in five years. Let's break that down. That's 12,000 youth participants each month— 12,000 names, each with age, gender, and phone number, among other data points. Can you imagine how difficult it is to reach this scale? And if we did manage to reach this scale, can you imagine how cumbersome it would be to process all the data?

During the first year of implementation, COVID-19 hit, and as a result, only a few interventions generated results. My team processed the data of only a few hundred youths in a month. As a programme, it took us a year to achieve what we were supposed to achieve in a month. During this time, Excel was my best friend. I had no trouble assuring data quality[10], compiling, and aggregating results.

Then came the second year. The number of interventions started to grow along with the number of partners. The MERL team started to get bombarded with results. The few participants whose names we knew by heart started to expand into thousands and thousands of faceless names. My trustee Excel could not keep up, even when running on the latest model laptop.

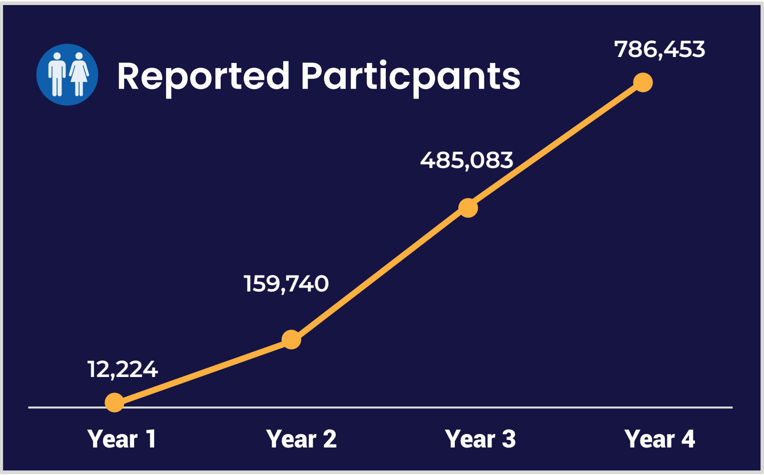


Figure 16: Reported Particpants

Our Programme Lead said, "This is a good problem to have." Indeed, we were all happy that the Programme was picking up, but there had to be a better way to manage the data. We started researching potential options for an efficient and user-friendly database management system. I went and talked to one of our IT partners. Sure enough, there was a better way. The idea came to life after three months of intensive collaboration. BRIDGES now had its own online reporting system that decentralised the entry process to partners, had mandatory fields to avoid incomplete data, and used participants' phone numbers as a unique identifier to avoid double counting (this is, of course, not 100% effective due to low device penetration; however, because the National ID is was not fully functional, it served as an alternative solution.) The system stored all the data coming from multiple interventions into one repository. Like in any change, we faced resistance from partners at the beginning when we introduced the database. However, through continuous onboarding processes and support, the partners started to use and see the benefits of the system— especially how it significantly reduced the lead time for data verification and milestone payment for partners. I consider this to be one of the best innovations for managing the Programme. By leveraging information and communication technology for development (ICT4D) solutions, we significantly enhanced programme management and MERL processes. These technological integrations facilitated precise data management and robust analytical capabilities, improving decision-making and elevating the efficacy of our initiatives. We shared this practice with other partners of the Mastercard Foundation in Ethiopia, and I am aware of at least one other programme that has started using the same tool.

[10] The Investment Committee includes the Programme Lead, the four pillar leads, the MERL Lead, and the Communications Lead, each with a vote that decides whether an intervention gets launched or not following the presentation of the idea by the intervention manager.

Making sense of the white noise

Now that we had information on the type of interventions, partners, cost, outreach, jobs supported, geography, and other data points, the next challenge was to bring all this together and make a meaningful analysis. I would be the first to admit that it was not a straightforward exercise for which even my previous experience prepared me. It took us some time to figure out if the different interventions can be combined for higher-level analysis or if they are independent of each other.

We made the first attempt by looking at the four pillars, each with its own focus area that could bring scale, impact, and cost. In this regard, we were doing a portfolio review at the pillar level. For example:

- How many interventions are contributing to the majority of the results? Is BRIDGES putting all its eggs in one pillar?
- Will the existing interventions generate enough results by the end of the Programme, or should we add additional interventions?
- Which pillar has the lowest and highest cost per job?
- Does enterprise formation bring more scale compared to employment linkage?
- Which pillar has achieved the highest conversion from outreach to youth in work[11]?
- How is a pillar's achievement compared to its budget utilisation?

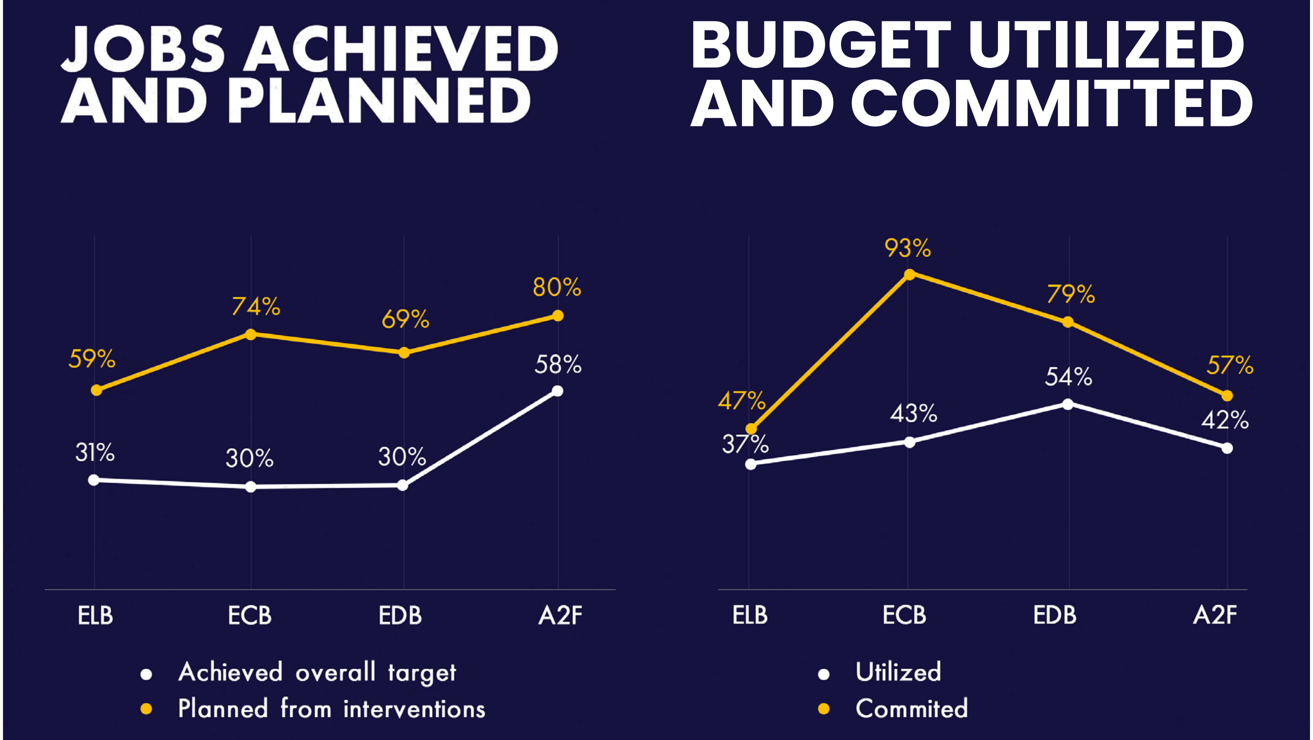


Figure 17: Intervention Analyses

[11] Outreach entails any participant that received support from the Programme. 'Youth in work' captures participants who have either started, improved, or sustained work as a result of the support received from the programme.

These analyses helped the Programme allocate resources where we thought they would be best used. There is always a trade-off between scale and intensity of support. The portfolio analysis helped to balance this by optimising the different sets of interventions. Relatively expensive interventions were given a chance to showcase the need while finding ways to reduce cost per job and reach more youth. For example, introducing digital interventions reduced the cost of reaching youth, which freed up resources for other interventions that required more resources than the average cost per job.

The next attempt at making sense of the data took it to another level. At this point, we evolved from pillar-focused analysis to programme-level analysis, and accordingly, the questions we asked changed.

- **Systemic vs direct intervention (the first aims to solve a systemic issue in a sector while the latter directly benefits a specific group of people):** Which type is bringing scale, which has the highest conversion from outreach to youth at work, and which is cost-effective?
- **Digital vs in-person:** Which is more efficient, and which is more impactful?
- **Layering support:** Which combination of support is generating higher conversion from outreach to youth in work?
- **Geography:** Are certain interventions creating more jobs in certain regions?

THE DISTRIBUTION OF YOUTH IN WORK

Youth in work (% contribution to overall result)

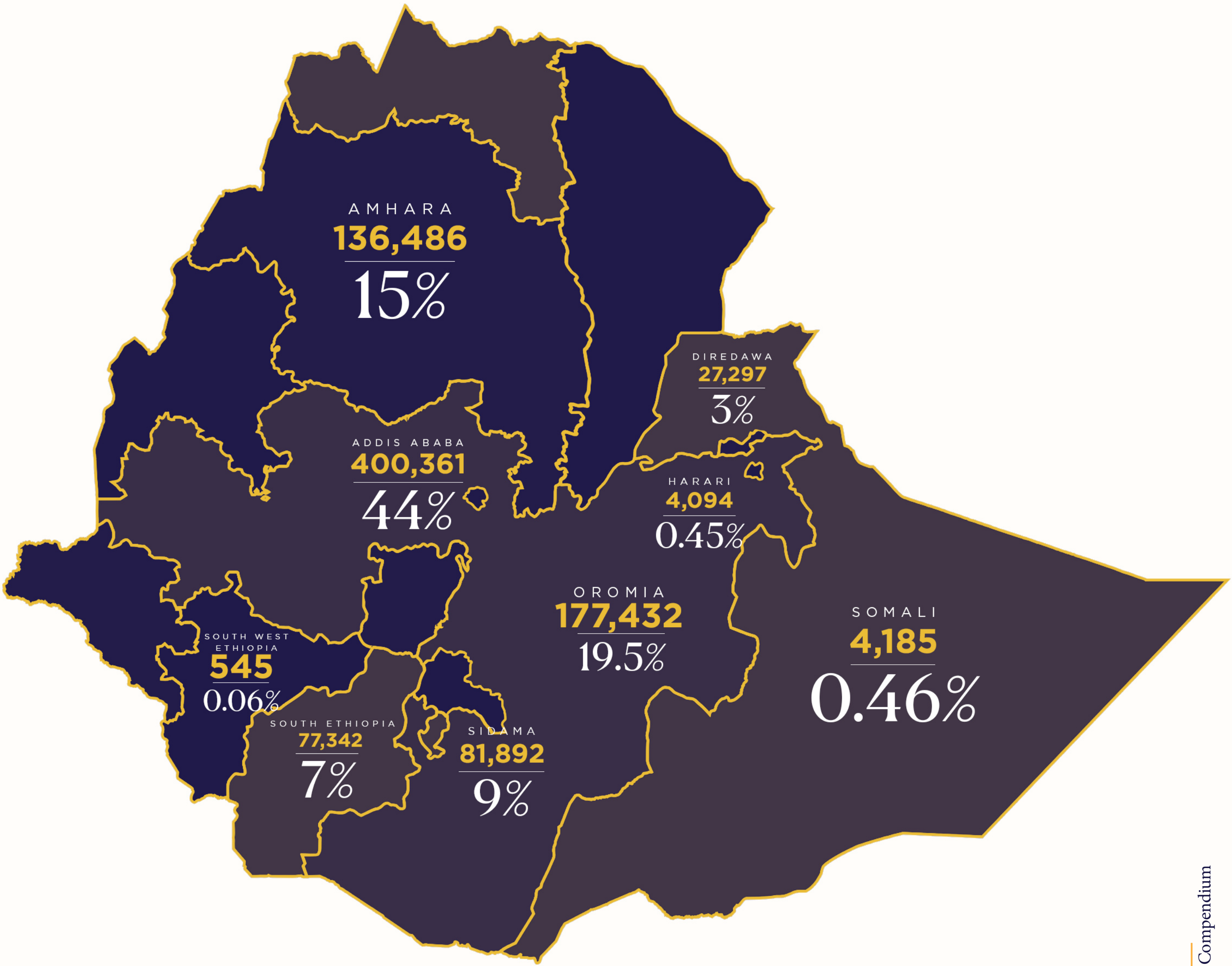


Figure 18: Intervention Analyses 2

These analyses help shape future programming for the Foundation and other stakeholders supporting Ethiopia's youth and micro, small, and medium enterprises.

Data-driven decision making
Fight or flight

We decide whether to fight or flight based on the success or failure of our interventions in achieving their goals. Participants are at the centre of this analysis. The MERL team would go to the field to hear back from participants regarding their experiences during our interventions. The need to hear from the participants themselves cannot be overemphasised. The participant is always right. We can be under the impression that a certain intervention is only okay at best but could mean the world to the participant, or vice versa. We do not know it all. It is sometimes humbling when data from the field completely shatters our assumptions. For example, when we were presented with the concept, we were initially sceptical that university graduates would be interested in compost recycling or that mindset training would be highly valued. However, we were pleasantly surprised to discover that both initiatives were well received by participants.

The MERL team sets out a work plan to assess intervention based on when changes are expected. However, we try to be flexible and respond to emerging needs. We might hear something interesting in a management meeting or quarterly review worth looking into. In addition, intervention managers also initiate assessment when they are looking to understand certain dynamics in the intervention. Following this process, the MERL team has undertaken over 40 assessments and surveyed over 40,000 participants during the past four years. We have used every avenue available to receive feedback from participants, including in-person, online, and phone surveys; key informant interviews; and focus group discussions.

- **So what?** How is this helping the unemployed youth struggling to make ends meet? In BRIDGES, we have a process whereby the findings of MERL assessments are presented to the intervention manager, the Pillar Lead, and the Programme Lead to inform decision-making.

An intervention can be progressing as expected or even beyond expectation. We try to analyse the factors for success and replicability. In such instances, we encourage intervention managers to scale up the intervention as quickly as possible. For example, an assessment we undertook on the effectiveness of the job matching service uncovered that it was successful because the partner is an employment agency. They had a network of employers and incentives to grow their business beyond the Programme. As such, based on the findings, the intervention was scaled up with the same partner as well as other similar partners across the country.

The other scenario is that the intervention is performing below expectations. I was personally more eager to assess such interventions over interventions that are doing well, perhaps it's the satisfaction of knowing you have contributed to solving a problem. Like the other scenario, we try to analyse what factors are contributing to the underperformance. If the factors can be addressed by enhancing the follow-up from intervention managers, adding other features to the intervention, or by discussing with stakeholders involved, we recommend course correction and continue to track the intervention to see if performances are improving. If the reasons for the underperformance cannot be addressed within the given timeframe and budget, we choose to discontinue the intervention. We then document the lessons learned to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future, unless the circumstances change. For example, one intervention targeted university graduates, encouraging them to save money and undergo entrepreneurship training. The amount saved was later matched by the Programme and used as an equity contribution to access loans from microfinance institutes so that the participants could start businesses after graduation.

This was a great idea on paper, but the intervention was struggling to attract graduates, and for those who managed to join, the saving rate was low and inconsistent. The MERL assessment uncovered that students did not have money to save, and for those who tried to do so, the partnering microfinance institution was not stepping up. Furthermore, the targeted students were on the brink of graduation, which would not give them enough lead time to save the necessary amount, and most of them were interested in landing a job instead of starting their own business. The targeting issue, the overestimated capacity of the youth to save money, and the lack of coordination among the partners resulted in the closure of the intervention and redesigning with a different set of partners.

Another example is a newly formed enterprise that received support from the Programme. These enterprises were under formation to become retailers for the Sheger Bread government project in Addis Ababa. The assessment uncovered that, even though they were happy they started work, the breads were sold out by 10 am and they had nothing to do for the rest of the day. This was a very interesting finding that was brought back to the implementation team. The team, in collaboration with Addis Ababa Urban Job Creation and Enterprise Development Bureau, came up with other products such as eggs, milk, and honey that could be sold parallelly with the bread.

The sessions where MERL presents findings from the field were not always easy. It requires a culture of honesty and respect among team members. This brings us to a long history of tension between intervention managers and MERL. Lucky for me, the tension is a healthy one. We can have long debates and difficult conversations without losing sight of what's at stake, which is always the young people. Intervention managers go through many obstacles to ensure their concept is implemented on the ground. Rest assured, I wouldn't want to be in their shoes. While sympathetic towards intervention managers, the MERL team did not shy away from depicting the reality as we saw it.

Most of the monitoring and evaluation community do not clearly see how they are impacting the lives of programme participants. I believe this may stem from their perceived inability to influence change in their specific organisation. Fortunately, that's not the case for MERL in BRIDGES. It has a vote on which interventions get launched and whether interventions should be scaled down, scaled up, or closed. That's powerful, and with great power comes great responsibility.

Personally, I believe MERL's biggest success is being able to influence intervention managers' decisions based on findings. This is data-driven decision-making. That's how we ensure participants get what they want and resources are best used to generate maximum impact. To my readers, have you fallen into the trap of doing something even though the data suggests otherwise?

Conclusion and Learning

When it comes to measurement, there is no silver bullet. Context is very important. What we ought to measure and what we can measure are two different things. We must consider rigour versus feasibility and budget versus timeliness. Of course, if we do some research and follow best practices, there is always a way. As my previous supervisor used to say, “Monitoring and evaluation is supposed to convince a rational person who is also sceptical.”

The importance of the quality of data cannot be overestimated. Investing in a database management system from the beginning is critical when dealing with scale. It is the starting point for tracing participants, ensuring proper reporting to a donor, and undertaking any further analysis. Data should be collected and grouped in a specific manner to allow different kinds of analyses. We began to realise this as we started to work with big data. It is very difficult to retrofit and get the full essence of what the data is trying to tell us. I sometimes beat myself up, “Why didn’t I think of that from the start?” It’s important to brainstorm the types of analysis the programme aims to undertake from the beginning and determine the depth and breadth of data required accordingly.

The participant is always right. We are not the ones determining whether the job is dignified and fulfilling for the youth; it’s the youth themselves. While the broader job creation agenda is set by the donor or the programme, how we help the youth get there should be defined by the participant, and the programme should strive to listen to them as much as possible. Programme success lies in how well we can put our pride and preconceived ideas aside and listen to the data.

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