

LESSONS LEARNED OVER THE YEARS: GREATEST HITS OR BROKEN RECORD?

No self-respecting outfit implementing an MSD programme would identify as anything but a learning organisation these days. But what has the systemic change community actually learned over the last 25 years? And are we learning new things or more of the same? ChatGPT couldn't tell us how many lessons learned reports have been written, but for those of us who were around at the turn of the century, it feels like we're often learning the same things over and over.

Since we also identify as a learning organisation, we're putting our money where our mouth is and seeing what we can learn from the bots. We'd like to introduce the 'Omniscient MSD Guru', **OMG**, who lives in the cloud and can analyse billions of data points in the time we've drafted a doughnut. Living the brand of purposeful experimentation, let's see if the digital dinosaurs (~~humans~~) agree with OMG's take on what we've learned.



OMG, what are some of the key lessons reported by MSD programmes over the past 25 years?



1. Systemic change takes time (no, really?)

Ah, the classic line that graces every project document like an unwanted guest. We all know market transformation isn't a microwave dinner—it's more of a slow-cooked stew that takes way longer than your standard three-to-five-year funding binge. But hey, why not just keep pretending Rome was built in a day?



OMG, you're not wrong. This does come up frequently. At one point in time, this surely was an important lesson to learn. But can we not take this as a given and plan for it, rather than repackage this vintage lesson... or use it as an excuse? With the right set up, focus and level of ambition a lot can still be achieved in five years. It only took NASA four years to get people on to the moon, after all.



2. Adaptive management is critical in unpredictable contexts (or at least, that's what they say...)

Oh, we love to *talk* about flexibility, but when the plan inevitably goes belly up (spoiler: it *always* does), most programs grip their original strategy like a dog with a bone. Instead of actually adapting, they go through the motions, ticking boxes and blaming "challenging contexts" or "inflexible funders". Yeah, sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night.



SMH, OMG. You may have many development professionals knocking at your virtual door to write their lessons learnt reports. [Note to self: ask OMG how I can retrain.] The only thing that is predictable is our continual inability to recognise that unpredictability is a fact of life and to design and manage programmes accordingly.



3. Measuring impact is challenging (apparently rocket science)

Ah yes, the ol' "it's too hard to measure systemic change" tune. Because why would we invest in new tools and frameworks when we can just keep counting latrines and tallying up trained bodies? Sure, it's easier to measure things that don't mean much, but maybe it's time to leave the comfort zone, hmm?



Hmmm, another lesson on repeat that is difficult to argue with. Yet I'm pleased to find something that a warm-blooded being disagrees with the digital overlords about. Measuring impact is challenging but by no means impossible. Nor do we necessarily need more frameworks or tools to get better at it. Over twenty-eight systems change frameworks were reviewed [here](#) and there are thirty-two results measurement tools available [here](#).



4. It is difficult to do MSD in thin markets/government-centric systems/my country

At the top of the charts is the widespread consensus that doing MSD is difficult, particularly in challenging contexts. 'Challenging contexts' appears to include every country defined as developing by the OECD or IMF, approximately 150 countries. It is not clear what the alternative to systemic change might be in these countries.



OMG, sometimes you might get the impression that MSD is only do-able in the San Francisco Bay Area or Copenhagen. But there's evidence of success in big, scary countries, in small, isolated countries, in conflicted-afflicted regions, in systems dominated by government. And since when should difficulty be our concern? Isn't that the point of development intervention? To take on the difficult stuff? The lives of poor and disadvantaged people are not easy; why should ours be?



5. MSD requires talented leadership and teams

"No s***, Sherlock", as the renowned development philosopher, Dr Watson, is purported to have said. The effectiveness of an MSD programme is often directly tied to the capabilities, mindset and approach of its team. Strong, skilled and adaptive teams are essential for facilitating sustainable and inclusive market changes.



So, MSD joins the ranks of successful companies, sports teams, military units and governments. Why is this a revelation for MSD or international development as a whole? Why do we think we can tackle complex change in 'challenging contexts' by fielding the B (or C) team, no matter how well meaning they might be? Surely, the more important lessons are about the type of talent required and how to recruit, motivate and retain it? Or understanding why the development industry consistently defines talent by the length of the CV, why academic and technical qualifications are prioritised over people and change management skills, why planners are preferred to seekers?

So, is that it? Are we fresh, local and organically fed human MSD professionals going to be displaced by OMG and their artificial colleagues? Or does this threat motivate us to do better? To commit to learning and doing new things rather than upcycling the same tunes and repackaging them as novel beats for a new generation? Your body, your choice, but the least we can do is help OMG do our jobs better by learning some new things and feeding the digital beast with some juicier insights than the same old stale songs.