STRATEGIC LEARNING AT AJWS

Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is working to build a more just and equitable world for all. At AJWS, we are passionate about meaningfully engaging in strategic learning to continually improve how we support partners, communities and social movements. We define strategic learning as an iterative, responsive and flexible practice in which we critically and systematically document and reflect on our work and seek evidence to inform our decisions.

LEARNING TO INFORM DECISIONS

The Strategic Learning, Research and Evaluation (SLRE) division at AJWS develops processes that create, foster and embed organizational learning culture. We believe a learning culture is crucial to support staff operating in complex and difficult environments to make the best decisions about priorities, strategies and tactics. SLRE seeks to support learning that informs strategic decisions on:

- **Prioritization:** We align our resources (e.g., time and money) with the results we want to achieve.

- **Program improvements:** We discern whether and how our programs are having an impact—and then use

these learnings to strengthen portfolios and adjust strategies to meet our goals.

- **Expand and sustain impact:** We demonstrate the impact of our programs and share knowledge on what works (and what doesn't) internally and externally— informing our advocacy, and contributing to the human rights field at large.
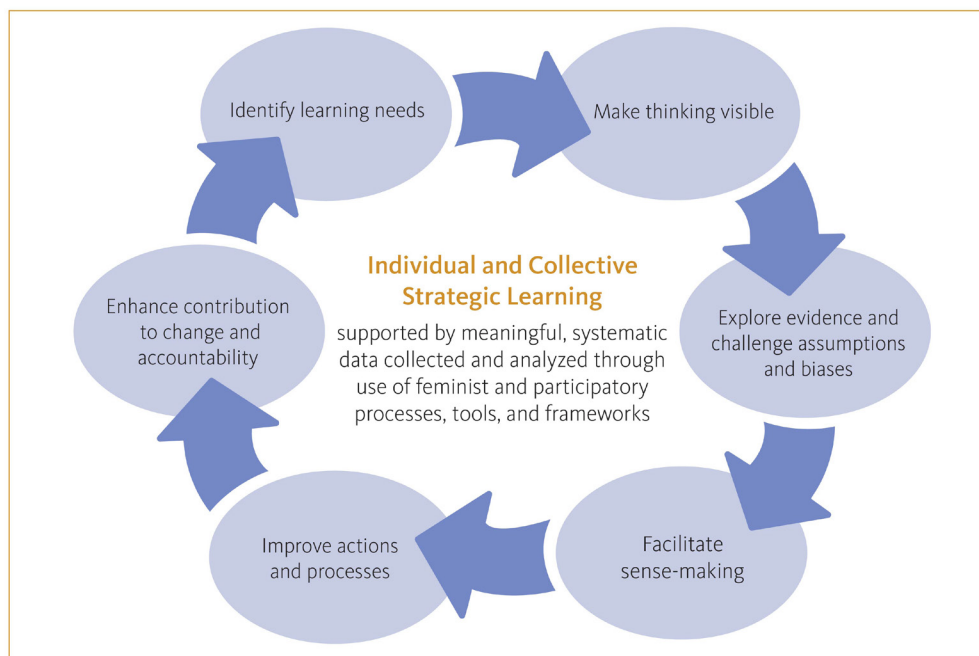
HOW DO WE MEASURE & EVALUATE SOCIAL CHANGE?

1. Defining success

Understanding and measuring change in human rights is complex, and initially it's crucial to agree on what progress looks like and define success, while also being flexible and understanding that change is nonlinear, progress is incremental and contributions are nuanced and diverse.

2. Developing and managing strategies

SLRE supports staff to develop four-year programmatic strategies that are responsive to the unique and changing context in each country and on each issue we work on. We outline what we hope to accomplish (annual milestones, four-year outcomes and 10-year goals), how we will get there and AJWS's strategic role in achieving these targets. Each year we document the progress or regress toward each strategy and engage in biannual

Identify learning needs

Make thinking visible

Individual and Collective Strategic Learning
supported by meaningful, systematic data collected and analyzed through use of feminist and participatory processes, tools, and frameworks

Explore evidence and challenge assumptions and biases

Enhance contribution to change and accountability

Improve actions and processes

Facilitate sense-making

reflection and learning to inform strategy management and improvements.

We use several tools to help us develop these strategies. We conduct *Research* to better answer questions which can help strengthen our programmatic strategies. We design the research with feminist and participatory approaches so that, through the process, we empower participants, build alignment on conceptual frameworks and create networks across participants. And we use our *Social Movement Tool* to understand and reflect on the social movements we support in order to inform our strategy, grant-making and accompaniment.

3. Measuring success

As we make progress in applying our strategies toward realizing our goals, we use *Evaluation* to systemically gather and analyse evidence that helps us to explain how and why changes are occurring—in order to understand and maximize our effectiveness and impact. We examine both intended and unintended changes and challenge our assumptions about when, how and why we contribute to social change. By understanding whether and how our strategies are effective, we can make informed decisions about how to better direct resources and strengthen our strategies in order to meet our desired goals. SLRE has developed qualitative and quantitative tools to

support staff in engaging in intentional and systematic analysis in a nuanced way:

- Our **Outcomes Monitoring Form** serves as the key tool for annual strategy documentation and analysis. Staff reflect on the level of change that's been achieved toward strategy milestones, outcomes and goals—and assess favorability of context, challenges, lessons learned and strategic considerations for the year ahead.

- Our **Legislative and Policy Tracking Tool** allows us to understand both grantees' and AJWS's advocacy goals, progress, regress and achievements—annually and over time.

- We also commission **external evaluations** for specific projects and in support of our broader learning agenda.

4. Utilizing Learning

We strive to ensure that the results from our learning efforts will always be productive and used in a timely way. We also share findings with our grantees and other funders so they can apply what we have learned in their strategies for change.

For example, to maximize use of a 2018 program-wide evaluation, SLRE facilitated a process to prioritize key findings—and together with the Programs Leadership Team (PLT) began working to address 11 high-priority findings. To ensure accountability and set expectations, SLRE and the PLT defined success and identified "owners" responsible for responding to and reporting on particular findings. The teams continued to meet to track progress and discuss challenges. By September 2020, AJWS staff had achieved successful endpoints for each high-priority finding, shared them with colleagues and integrated them into the institution's processes.