

Sawiris Foundation for Social Development



Principle 2



I firmly believe in evidence-based programming as a tool to make real change in the lives of those we serve. However, I also champion the fact that we need to work continuously on identifying more efficient, innovative, and impactful interventions – and it only is by being fully transparent and accountable for our successes and our failures, that we can hope to understand and share what we have truly learned.

Abdel Rahman Nagy

Director of Learning and Strategy, Sawiris Foundation



About the Sawiris Foundation

The Sawiris Foundation was founded in April 2001 as a grant-making foundation set up with an endowment from the Sawiris family, made up of prominent members of the business world and the development community. It is among the first Egyptian family foundations dedicated to social development.

What was the challenge?

Addressing the many complex challenges in society requires us to push boundaries and take risks to identify potentially game-changing innovations. However, to do this effectively we need data, and that currently presents a major challenge. Particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the lack of data is frequently identified as a major obstacle to implementing evidence-based developmental initiatives. As a result, it is hard to know where to focus philanthropic efforts for maximum impact, and how effective existing programmes are.

Staff at the Sawiris Foundation are keenly aware of this challenge and became concerned that the organisation's successful track record may have led to a 'tunnel vision' of sorts – one where they only thought about how to reach communities rather than addressing the deeper questions of why help was needed and what impact their support was having. They also keenly knew that both successes and failures offered opportunities for learning and continuous improvement.

What was the response?

In 2015 the Sawiris Foundation consulted with partners and advisors about how it might work more effectively, which led the team to explore a new approach focused on evaluating the impact of the Foundation's funding, rather than just monitoring activities they support.

In this way, the Foundation moved beyond simply documenting success stories, and for the first time was able to learn just as much from failure (i.e. where the desired impact had not been achieved) as it did from success. This enabled them to develop their appetite for taking measured risks to drive greater innovation.

As part of their efforts, the Sawiris Foundation has established a new Learning and Strategy unit, focused on continuously improving their work and maximising impact. This team set out to understand how they could be more effective in their work, leading them to realise the importance of shifting focus from the "how" to the "why, what and for who" – highlighting the impact they had on lives rather than on the processes and activities involved. This transformation required engaging stakeholders to support the journey, including their Board, executive team, staff across all levels, and their implementation partners.

These stakeholders asked themselves certain questions to ensure their thinking was best aligned with their recent shifts in focus:

- ✓ How can the organisation best adopt a risk-forward approach to their programming that is both ambitious but also driven by local needs?
- ✓ What types of internal transformation are needed within the organisation itself to ensure a risk-taking appetite and an organisational culture built around appreciating philanthropy's role as risk capital?
- ✓ Since failure is often not shared openly in the philanthropy sector, how could Sawiris Foundation become a pioneer in encouraging philanthropic funders that risk and failure are natural parts of discovering the most effective programmes?

The Foundation also drew on existing insights from the philanthropic field to help inform their transformation programming, including:

- ✓ **Developing a specific track for innovative projects** that may be risky, but which have the potential to deliver significant impact. The Sawiris Foundation now has special targets for these projects as a percentage of funding to be used as 'risk capital'. They typically initiate these projects by conducting a gap analysis, reviewing existing literature, and interviewing policymakers to deeply understand the problem at hand. They collaborate with researchers and policymakers to develop a list of potential interventions. These options are implemented and evaluated, usually through randomised control trials (RCTs) to see which ones are effective. Not all projects need to follow this process, though. Those deemed as having a high likelihood of success, such as Pratham's 'Teaching at the Right Level,' would be rolled out immediately. An ongoing challenge Sawiris Foundation faces is securing top researchers who can volunteer their time for impact evaluations.
- ✓ **Internal transformation as a funder to embed new ways of working** rooted in innovation, agility and an evidence-based approach. This began with understanding the perspectives of different groups and communicating the benefits of the change. The Board and executive team were consulted on maximising the impact of their financial resources by supporting programmes that were evidence-based, as well as streamlining the Foundation team's workload. For the wider organisation, the largest barrier they faced was introducing the 'why' into their work and overcoming barriers such as status quo bias and resistance to change, as well as the time, cost and resources needed for transformation. For instance, many wondered why change was needed from "the way we have always worked". Here, the team also positioned the change as a continuous learning opportunity, which appealed to the Foundation's staff. The Foundation invested significant effort to manage this change, conducting numerous workshops, webinars and other sessions to engage its staff and embed the new strategy into the daily lives of its team members. They also regularly highlighted the need to be open and transparent and ensure a safe environment for feedback and failure. Overall, it was critical to ensure all staff across the organisation lived and breathed the change. The staff needed to feel that they were an integral part of the shift to gain a strong sense of ownership.
- ✓ **Embracing, documenting and sharing failure**, as well as success. Getting things wrong sometimes must be seen as a natural consequence of pushing boundaries: 100% success rates are only possible if you aren't taking any risks. Sawiris Foundation uses impact evaluations to document failures, typically conducted by organisations like the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). They have also started evaluating projects quantitatively and reporting quarterly to identify any improvement areas. Learnings are incorporated into practice through discussions between teams and the process is iterative, with quarterly discussions and annual staff deliberations to integrate learnings into their programmes, including thorough documentation of all data and learnings. The Foundation also believes that learning from its failures will be valuable to the wider philanthropic community and strives to share them openly across a range of media (blogs, journal articles, events). They are currently developing a website specifically dedicated to their failures and learnings and regularly share insights openly through media outlets.
- ✓ **Engaging external stakeholders** to bring them on the journey. They realised this change would require their implementation partners to be on board as well. Here, the team faced varying responses: Some partners

immediately embraced the change, while others showed varying levels of enthusiasm but needed guidance on the why and the how. The Foundation's team engaged in a phased approach, starting immediately with partners who were willing and excited. This was complemented by a three-year large-scale capacity-building programme for organisations that need further guidance. This initiative aims to clarify new modalities and terminologies for their work, including introducing the themes of why, what, and the theory of change, as well as tools for evidence-based interventions to better help those they serve. Inevitably, some partners resisted the change completely. The team has therefore focused its efforts on the coalition of the willing. The Foundation also faced pressure from the broader social development ecosystem which saw them as deviating from 'business as usual'. The Foundation's team sees this as a natural reaction to transformation and continues to have two-way engagements with stakeholders to communicate and share learnings. These engagements have included 1-to-1 meetings, seminars, and blogs. They also work with partners to co-design projects and address any concerns.

The realisation that even philanthropic interventions which fail to achieve their desired impact have value is hugely important. However, they only have value if we can use them as the basis for learning and continuous improvement among foundations and the broader philanthropy sector; that said, there are real practical and cultural barriers to making this happen. If organisations have no mechanisms in place to evaluate and learn when things do not go as planned, then failures will simply remain just failures. Moreover, even where organisations can learn from their failures, they may be reluctant to share those findings if they believe this will reflect poorly on them or undermine their reputation.

What have they learned?

- ✓ **Moving towards evidence-based programming is often challenging, and much easier said than done.** It takes time to alter mindsets, convince stakeholders, and push through with change. However, the benefits can be enormous, especially given the limited resources that philanthropic actors have to work with.
- ✓ **Take risks to maximise impact.** Business as usual, with no evidence backing interventions, may have little or no impact on those we serve. We must push boundaries, take risks and measure our impact.
- ✓ **Avoid reinventing the wheel.** Scan literature and learn from others to build on evidence-based programmes (such as the Targeting the Ultra Poor programme pioneered by BRAC) as starting points for the transformation of organisations.
- ✓ **Be open and honest about failure to learn from it.** It is important to ensure there is space for innovation and continuous learning – from failure as well as success – and to share that learning with the wider philanthropic community through diverse channels that can reach numerous audiences.
- ✓ **Collaboration is vital.** It is through collaborating closely and pooling resources with like-minded partners that we can learn from each other, build on each other's successes and failures, and spread risks. This leads to more well-rounded interventions.
- ✓ **Get the whole organisation on board.** In order to embed a culture of continuous learning and innovation, it is important to ensure that the whole organisation is well-versed in your strategy and that the entire team 'lives and breathes' your approach.
- ✓ **Embed agility.** Only doing evaluations at the end of projects takes time and misses opportunities for improvement. Monitoring progress and being agile enables ongoing learning and course correcting if needed. Engage with stakeholders and peers in the social development arena to better design interventions.

Key outcomes and impact indicators

2,400

The Bab Amal Graduation programme, in partnership with BRAC International and J-PAL MENA, impacted 2,400 extremely poor households; initial results indicated programme participants were less affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Improve quality

The early childhood development programme, in collaboration with the Ministry of Social Solidarity, UNICEF, Egyptian Food Bank and J-PAL, utilised RCTs and is expected to positively influence national policies to increase child enrolment in nurseries, improve teaching quality and increase female labour force participation.

Thousands of people

Developing and sharing Sawiris Foundation's experiences through blog posts and academic journals, which are widely shared and reached thousands of people.