



Who Defines Success?

*An Annotated Bibliography on
Community-Centered Measurement
and Evaluation*

Center for Grantmaking Research



Introduction

Community-centered measurement refers to approaches that shift authority over defining success, generating evidence, and interpreting results to communities themselves. The resources below explore this theme from multiple perspectives, including participatory evaluation, decolonial and feminist approaches, human-centered design, philanthropic power dynamics, and critiques of dominant evidence paradigms.

Resources in the first two sections were compiled by Dr. Dana Doan, whose work has helped advance conversations on community-centered measurement, equitable evaluation, and participatory approaches to learning and evidence generation. Resources in the section on “human-centered design approaches” were shared by Jennifer Mosley and Nicole Marwell, authors of [Mismeasuring Impact. How randomized controlled trials threaten the nonprofit sector.](#)

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1. Practitioner Perspectives

Levy, A., & Jideofor, N. (March, 2025). *The Power Shifting Shuffle: Mapping Power Dynamics & Practices Inside Human Rights Philanthropy*. Commissioned by the Fund for Global Human Rights. [Link to report](#).

Key findings: Localization efforts often reconstitute rather than truly transfer authority, specifically privileging English-speaking elites with Northern educations over the grassroots movements they intend to reach. Commissioned by the Fund for Global Human Rights, this research captures data from twenty-five interviews showing that two-thirds of staff experience heightened top-down interference in grant decision-making despite public rhetoric. Researchers identified a recurring pattern of "process gymnastics," where intermediary employees must constantly translate between restrictive donor compliance regimes and the fluid realities of frontline activists. Moments of systemic shock, such as the 2020 racial reckoning, served as the primary catalysts for innovation, yet these participatory gains frequently proved temporary as institutions reverted to default business-as-usual practices.

Why we should read this report: Philanthropic directors contemplating a strategy refresh should examine this text to uncover why their public equity commitments might be stalling within back-office finance and HR departments. By analyzing the bureaucratic "how" rather than just values-driven rhetoric, the authors provide a realistic lens for assessing whether organizational risk-mitigation protocols are quietly strangling innovation. This analysis serves grantmakers who need to determine if their "invite-only" defaults are undermining their stated goals of reaching marginalized communities.

Shallwani, S. (September, 2025). *Influencing funders to shift power: Lessons from the Giving for Change initiative*. Commissioned by Wilde Ganzen on behalf of the Giving for Change Alliance. [Link to report.](#)

Key findings: Funder requests for formulaic toolkits often backfire by reducing complex power dynamics to a checklist that protects donor control rather than ceding it. Consultations with 31 practitioners within the Giving for Change alliance indicate that while 17 funder organizations adopted progressive rhetoric, their underlying risk and compliance frameworks stayed remarkably static. This inquiry demonstrates that the definition of success is still largely prescribed by Global North boards using inflexible timelines that ignore the generational nature of authentic community-led transformation.

Why we should read this report: Philanthropic executives overseeing localization efforts should examine these results to understand why their staff often default to projectizing equity instead of transforming institutional culture. It provides the evidence needed for a board-level conversation regarding the misalignment between high-level social justice values and prohibitive back-office legal requirements. Learning from the collective experience of partners like Wilde Ganzen or UNNGOF helps identify how to transition from transactional grantmaking to a co-investment model that values local assets over Northern compliance.

Pradeep, N. (April 6, 2026). *Reclaiming Research through Participatory Action: From 'Dirty Word' to Shared Knowledge.* [Link to post.](#)

Key findings: Conventional scholarly inquiry often functions as "epistemicide," a term used by Boaventura de Sousa Santos to describe the active destruction of local knowledge systems through extraction and silencing. Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes that for many indigenous groups, the term "research" remains a "dirty word" because it historically involved measuring human faculties by filling ancestral skulls with millet seeds. Conclusively, Narayanan argues that "success" is currently defined by Global North boards and industry interests through biomedical categories that treat lived experience as a peripheral "bay leaf" rather than a foundational data source.

Why we should read this post: Grantmakers investing in international health should consult Narayanan's perspective to recognize how their own funding designs might prioritize profitable, uniform technologies over long-term social determinants. Monitoring systems described here help program officers decide whether their data collection is genuinely capturing community well-being or simply reproducing caste-based and colonial power hierarchies. Evaluators can use the proposed "five shifts" to identify the internal bureaucratic mechanisms that transform complex stories into dehumanized variables.

Sindhani (November, 2024). A Sindhani on Monitoring and Evaluation, Southern Voices for Global Development. [Link to post.](#)

Key findings: M&E localization is frequently the final hurdle in organizational shifts because Northern grant-makers view evaluation as their primary instrument for maintaining ideological surveillance. Research from Southern Voices for Global Development identifies a pervasive trend toward "localisation," a process where Western-centric models—typical of organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—are simply mirrored in local contexts without a genuine transfer of political power. Ultimately, this document argues that impact is currently measured through a "Theory of Reinforcing the Status Quo," where success is defined by Global North boards using neoliberal metrics that prioritize individual agency over radical collective bargaining.

Why should we read this resource: Philanthropic strategists should engage with this text to recognize the administrative "isms"—from patriarchy to neoliberalism—that quietly govern their back-office protocols. The "feeding tube" framework offers a sophisticated lens for determining whether a program is truly shifting authority or merely swapping personnel while retaining extractive methodologies. Every decision-maker aiming to fulfill USAID's 2030 localization targets will benefit from the analysis of how standardized data requirements often serve as "epistemicide" against indigenous knowledge systems.

The Full Spectrum Coalition (FSC) (November, 2025). *Supporting Values-based Holistic Community-led Development: An Evidence and Learning Initiative of the Full Spectrum Coalition.*
[Link to resource.](#)

Key findings: The Full Spectrum Coalition (FSC) utilizes a Holistic Community-led Development (HCLD) approach to empower grassroots organizations and local leaders in achieving sustainable, multidimensional impact. This approach focuses on fostering social transformation—such as improved gender equity and inclusion—and strengthened governance, which provides the essential foundation for community resilience. Through a five-year collaborative learning initiative, the FSC aims to generate new scientific understanding and evidence that can help transition the global development landscape toward these community-led strategies. Currently, the coalition's work demonstrates that HCLD results in significant human development and environmental outcomes by reinforcing the existing strengths and capabilities of partner communities.

Why should we read this resource: This resource is vital for understanding how to move toward an ethical, values-based development model that recognizes communities as the primary agents of their own progress. It details a collaborative research framework designed to provide funders, practitioners, and policymakers with transferable guidance to resource and adapt HCLD strategies effectively. Ultimately, it offers a compelling vision and practical roadmap for creating systemic impact through trust-based partnerships that prioritize local dignity and potential.

Unity Effect (March 2, 2026). *Regenerative Evaluation Living Paper Launch*. [Link to source](#).

Key Findings: The "Regenerative Evaluation Living Paper" is a publication designed to bridge the gap between traditional rigorous reporting and the urgent need for ecological regeneration. Developed over 2.5 years by a dedicated Community of Practice, it shifts evaluation from an extractive exercise of "mining data" to one that prioritizes the health of the systems being measured. The paper introduces a framework consisting of three essential strands, systemic, power-conscious, and ecological, alongside nine guiding principles and seven core practices. These components guide practitioners through a methodology of grounding, tending, and replanting to better align their impact work with the dynamics of living systems.

Why we should read this resource: This resource is vital for evaluators, funders, and changemakers who want to move beyond rigid reporting toward methods that honor complexity and trust-based alternatives. It offers practical value by providing real-world case studies and frameworks that translate regenerative philosophy into tangible fieldwork. Engaging with this paper connects readers to a broader community and an upcoming dialogue series aimed at evolving how we measure social and environmental change.

**Global Change Center, Praxis UK, and Praxis
Institute for Participatory Practices (March 13,
2024). *An Analysis on Equity-Centered Evaluation
in International Cooperation.* [Link to report.](#)**

Key Findings: Evaluation is a critical decision-making tool in international cooperation, but it often reflects the power imbalances and cultural biases inherent in Global North and South dynamics. Decisions regarding who conducts evaluations and which methodologies are used are typically driven by those with the most power, which can exacerbate the very inequalities funders seek to combat. The report identifies this challenge and explores how current practices can be restructured to be more inclusive. It specifically outlines tactics for centering equity to mitigate these historical power imbalances.

Why we should read this resource: This resource is essential for understanding how traditional evaluation can unintentionally reinforce systemic biases and power disparities. It provides a framework for shifting toward equitable practices that better serve the interests of all stakeholders involved. By reading this, you gain insight into changing the way evaluation is conducted to ensure it effectively reduces inequality.

Moore, T. R., Valmadrid, L. C., Baragwanath, R., Haack, N., & Bakken, L. (March, 2024). *Gatekeeping's Influence on Equitable Evaluation Practice*. American Journal of Evaluation, 45(1), 29–50. [Link to article](#).

Key findings: The study introduces Gatekeeping Influence Theory (GIT), which defines 'gatekeeping' as a psycho-social-cultural process where individuals or groups control access to stakeholders, information, and resources. Researchers found that these gatekeeping disruptions, such as power imbalances and lack of access, often thwart equitable evaluation practices and can reinforce existing social inequities. To navigate these barriers, evaluators employ strategies including building trusting relationships, redefining their professional roles, and adopting specific equitable frameworks like culturally responsive evaluation. Ultimately, the theory suggests that addressing these relational and structural dynamics is essential for producing reliable and representative evaluation results.

Why we should read this resource: This resource is essential because it addresses a significant gap in research regarding how gatekeeping impacts stakeholder-engaged and participatory evaluations. It offers a comprehensive framework for identifying the hidden power dynamics and social-structural contexts that can compromise the integrity of an evaluation's findings. By reading this, practitioners can gain actionable insights into navigating contentious collaborations to ensure their work truly values and includes community voices.

Marco Di Natale (February 11, 2026). *Measuring more and learning less*. Stanford Social Innovation Review. [Link to article](#).

Key findings: The social sector suffers from a fundamental deficit in evaluative rigor and institutional standards rather than a simple disagreement over the use of Randomized Control Trials (RCTs). Evaluation is currently dominated by a "tyranny of nominality," where organizations prioritize counting activities and outputs over understanding actual effects or learning from failure. Research indicates a significant resource imbalance, noting a 10:1 ratio between program staff and evaluation staff, which leaves many grantees unable to articulate clear theories of change. To address this, the sources suggest that philanthropy must shift toward theory-driven design and long-term capacity building to ensure that evaluation serves as a tool for genuine social transformation.

Why we should read this resource: This resource is essential for understanding why the social sector often "evaluates more but learns less," reframing the conversation from methodological preferences to strategic responsibility. It provides practical frameworks for philanthropy and civil society to move beyond activity-based metrics toward evidence-based explanations of change. Ultimately, it argues that establishing rigor is an ethical and democratic necessity, enabling organizations to improve lives more effectively through reliable knowledge

2. Academic Scholarship

Aaron Horvath (2024). *Philanthropy by the numbers*. The Hedgehog Review. [Link to article.](#)

Key findings: The shift toward measurable impact has transformed philanthropy into a system of rational calculations, where tools like Social Return on Investment (SROI) treat social interventions as if they were business units. This movement, driven by a new generation of tech-wealth donors, prioritizes quantified moral clarity over intuition, often viewing complex social issues as simple "distributional problems". Although intended to increase accountability, these metrics function as a "technology of distance" that replaces active community engagement with atomistic, consumer-like choice. Consequently, an obsession with what can be measured risks eroding the unmeasurable relationships and collective experiences that are essential for sustaining democracy.

Why we should read this resource: This resource provides a vital critique of the Effective Altruism movement, arguing that prioritizing "quantified moral clarity" can dehumanize beneficiaries and hollow out civil society. It encourages readers to look beyond spreadsheets and recognize how a hyper-focus on metrics may actually accelerate the decline of meaningful, hands-on community action. By reading this, one gains a deeper understanding of how the "price of efficiency" in giving might be the loss of the very social bonds that uphold democracy.

Marwell, N. P., & Mosley, J. E. (October 1, 2025). *The nonprofit sector has an RCT problem*. Stanford Social Innovation Review. [Link to article.](#)

Key findings: The sources argue that randomized controlled trials (RCTs), while labeled the "gold standard," often provide false certainty due to technical issues like insufficient statistical power and contaminated control groups. Beyond technical flaws, RCTs can stifle organizational agility and create a "rich get richer" dynamic that favors well-resourced nonprofits over smaller, innovative ones. These evaluations often overlook a nonprofit's broader contributions, such as fostering community engagement and building social capital. Consequently, the text advocates for an improvement orientation that focuses on tailored strategies, centering participant perspectives, and iterative problem-solving.

Why we should read this resource: This resource is a vital read for nonprofit leaders and funders because it exposes the hidden organizational costs and trade-offs of rigid, high-stakes evaluation. It offers practical frameworks for centering participant voices and using iterative feedback loops to ensure services remain responsive to changing social needs. Ultimately, it provides a roadmap for shifting evaluation toward a learning-focused approach that strengthens an organization's long-term capacity for social impact.

Post, M., & Dodge, J. (2019). *Performance Assessment in Grassroots Nonprofit Advocacy: The promise of Qualitative and Participatory Approaches from a Critical Perspective*. In A. Eikenberry, Mirabella, R.M., & B. Sandberg (Eds.), *Reframing nonprofit organizations: Democracy, inclusion, and social change* (First, p. Chapter 11 (pp. 138–153)). [Link to book chapter](#).

Key findings: This text explores how critical theory can be applied to the performance assessment of grassroots nonprofit advocacy. It highlights the promise of qualitative and participatory approaches to evaluation, specifically within the context of democracy, inclusion, and social change. The authors aim to bridge the gap between complex theoretical perspectives and the practical application of nonprofit and voluntary organization management. By reframing traditional topics like governance and planning, the work provides a critical perspective on sustainability and social justice

Why we should read this resource: You should read this resource because it makes critical theory understandable to readers regardless of their previous knowledge or background. It is specifically designed to foster thought-provoking and engaging discussions for those interested in the management of voluntary organizations. Additionally, it offers a unique framework for reframing nonprofit organizations to better align with democratic and inclusive goals.

Klein, L., & Kadaoui, K. (2024). *Realising metamorphic transformation in the mirror of Tamkeen: Growing a shared understanding from co-reflected lived experiences*. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 41(5), 738–749. [Link to article](#).

Key findings: The Tamkeen process is presented in the sources as a relationship-oriented inquiry that facilitates metamorphic transformation by evolving social systems into humanising ecosystems through co-reflected lived experiences. A key finding is the emergence of an ontoepistemology where ontology, epistemology, and axiology converge, centering the "essentiality and existentiality of love" as a core component of systemic research. The research emphasizes the paradigm of being both the gardener and the garden, suggesting that individual development and societal change are inseparable and mutually constitutive. This approach results in emerging governance and "facilitating evaluation," which allows communities to embody a desired future of harmony in the present rather than waiting for a distant goal.

Why we should read this resource: This resource is essential for those seeking to understand social transformation beyond standard innovation models, focusing instead on deep human connection and "epistemic humility." It provides a unique perspective on silent, organic transformation, illustrating how the "mirror of Tamkeen" and a language of compassion can achieve change beyond traditional, linear project management. Additionally, it challenges researchers to transcend scientific limitations by adopting "witness thinking" and witnessing the systemicity of social ecosystems through a shared growing understanding.

Desalvo, C., Dossa, S., & Modungwa, B. (2023). *Disrupting learning and evaluation practices in philanthropy from a feminist lens*. *Gender & Development*, 31(2–3), 617–635. [Link to article](#).

Key findings: Mainstream Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning practices are identified as tools that reinforce patriarchal, imperialist, and colonial power structures by elevating Western modes of thinking and donor-centric accountability. These traditional approaches often marginalize the voices of girls, indigenous peoples, and LGBTQI+ communities, disconnecting social movements from their own collective knowledge. The sources argue for a paradigm shift toward "feminist decolonized" learning that prioritizes community needs, centers multiple ways of knowing, and replaces technocratic language with accessible visuals. Meaningful change requires intentional resourcing, such as flexible core funding and commitments to "language and time justice," to ensure inclusive and non-extractive participation.

Why we should read this article: The source offers real-world case studies and shared insights from feminist practitioners in the global South who are actively disrupting oppressive philanthropic structures through collective resistance. They provide a critical reflexive analysis of how learning can be transformed from a tool of donor control into a methodology for horizontal dialogue and solidarity. Professionals and activists should read this to gain a practical vision for decolonizing knowledge production and building "brave spaces" that center the people they exist to serve.

Bledsoe, K. L., & Pérez-Troncoso, M. (2025). *People-Centered Evaluation: Integrating Theories and Practices for a Transformative Model*. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 2025(188), 13–22. [Link to article](#).

Key findings: Professional evaluation often obscures its true purpose when practitioners prioritize programmatic efficiency over the fundamental human condition and relational stewardship. Bledsoe and Pérez-Troncoso utilize their work with the SEAS Islands Alliance to operationalize a framework of nine tenets across four quadrants including theory, method, positionality, and practice. Success is co-constructed in this model as "robustness"—the ability to tell deep, reflective stories of community resilience—defined by the participants themselves through the prioritization of their own lived expertise.

Why we should read this resource: Institutional donors seeking to uphold social justice commitments should study this text to recognize how traditional, objective-focused metrics can inadvertently silence marginalized voices. The analysis helps directors decide when to exchange extractive data collection for long-term "relational accountability" that centers community well-being. Adopting these perspectives allows a funder to move toward a co-investment model where local knowledge ownership is the primary indicator of a successful partnership.

Tassie, B., Murray, V., Cutt, J., & Bragg, D. (1996). *Rationality and Politics: What Really Goes on When Funders Evaluate the Performance of Fundees?* Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 25(3), 347–363. [Link to article.](#)

Key findings: Evaluators frequently view their own non-formal, subjective judgments—such as an organization's reputation or perceived value alignment—as being just as valid and rational as data derived from formal scientific methods. In a case study of a Federated Funding Organization (FFO) and a Voluntary Social Service Organization (VSSO), researchers discovered that while the official evaluation used 40 specific criteria, 37 of these were process-oriented rather than outcome-focused. Funding levels often remain stagnant or decrease based on "system-level" concerns that are never explicitly shared with the fundee, such as the FFO's 1992 strategic goal to redistribute resources from established agencies to newer, ethno-specific groups. Success in this framework is ultimately a 'negotiated order' where evidence is defined by the funder's internal political priorities and unstated system-wide benchmarks rather than the community's own self-determined progress.

Why we should read this resource: Philanthropic directors who suspect their official impact reports are merely a performance should read this analysis to grasp how unstated methods actually drive allocation decisions. The analysis provides a helpful lens for identifying the Type I and Type II errors that occur when evaluators lack enough local information to judge an agency's true community standing. Such perspectives are particularly relevant for trustees who want to reconcile the tension between their desire for objective data and the inherently political nature of social service funding. By making the hidden bases of judgment more explicit, leaders can begin to build a shared understanding with partners that reduces cynicism and improves organizational learning.

Gugerty, M. K., & Karlan, D. (2018). *The Goldilocks challenge: Right-fit evidence for the social sector*. Oxford University Press. [Link to book](#).

Key findings: Most social organizations struggle with a surplus of unusable information rather than a deficit of evidence. Gugerty and Karlan introduce the CART principles—Credible, Actionable, Responsible, and Transportable—to help managers identify the minimum viable data necessary for effective operations. A robust theory of change acts as the required precursor to this strategy, ensuring that every metric collected has a specific, intended use in future decision-making. This framework reveals that success is defined as the pragmatic alignment of data with institutional goals, primarily determined by leaders and donors who prioritize internal efficiency and stewardship of scarce resources.

Why we should read this book: Grantmakers who suspect their reporting requirements are creating more noise than value should use this text to right-size their expectations. It provides a logical basis for identifying which metrics are distractions and which truly assist a grantee in refining their services. Trustees can apply these lessons to ensure their funding supports the development of internal learning systems rather than just satisfying external demands for proof.

Ebrahim, Alnoor. (2019). *Measuring Social Change: Performance and Accountability in a Complex World*. Stanford University Press. [Link to book](#).

Key findings: Effective performance tracking depends on matching measurement systems to one of four distinct strategic models—niche, integrated, emergent, or ecosystem—rather than seeking a universal metric. Ebrahim argues that leaders must identify which specific outcomes they can legitimately take credit for within a landscape of rising global inequality. Consequently, this text reveals that success is defined as the internal alignment of performance systems with a chosen strategy, a process managed by organizational directors and funders rather than the communities whose lives are being measured.

Why we should read this book: Grantmaking boards tired of superficial data will find this text useful for clarifying how different organizational goals require fundamentally different accountability designs. Foundation directors can apply the four strategy archetypes to determine if their current metrics are undermining the work they fund. This perspective is particularly valuable for agencies deciding whether to prioritize simple outcome tracking or more complex systemic analysis.

What is human-centered design?

Human-centered design broadly refers to placing the intended users of a program, service, or policy at the center of the design process. It typically follows an iterative cycle of empathizing with, and understanding, people's experiences and needs, defining the problem, generating possible solutions, developing prototypes, and testing and refining those ideas through feedback. Human-centered design is particularly relevant to community-centered measurement, as it creates opportunities for people's experiences and needs to shape how programs are designed and success is understood.

Human-Centered Design Approaches

IDEO (n.d.). *Design Thinking: Human-Centered Innovation*. [Link to source.](#)

Key findings: Design thinking is a human-centered approach to solving complex problems by integrating human needs, technological possibilities, and business requirements. The core of this methodology relies on balancing what is desirable for people, viable for organizations, and feasible with technology. It is described as a flexible, iterative process comprised of seven key components that help teams navigate uncertainty and learn through making and testing. Rather than turning everyone into designers, the approach focuses on fostering a more creative and collaborative way of working to move from ambiguity to clarity.

Why we should read this resource: This resource provides a foundational understanding of how to apply a designer's toolkit to generate innovative solutions and achieve business success. It highlights practical pathways for professional growth, such as IDEO U, where individuals can develop essential skills in creative leadership. Reading this helps clarify how these principles can be used day-to-day to transform organizational challenges into clear, actionable opportunities.

The Consortium for Public Education (July 15, 2025). *Human-Centered Design Resources (HCD)*. [Link to source.](#)

Key findings: Human-centered design (HCD) serves as a subset of design thinking that equips educators with tools to increase engagement and develop stronger solutions for students, colleagues, and community members. The design cycle is organized into five distinct phases: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test. Within these phases, specific methods like interviewing, stakeholder mapping, and structured brainstorming help synthesize data and refine challenges. Ultimately, the process balances divergent thinking to generate numerous ideas with convergent thinking to prioritize and test the most effective solutions.

Why we should read this resource: This resource is essential for anyone looking to find inclusive and engaging solutions to educational problems through a structured, reference-based approach. It provides a comprehensive menu of actionable techniques, such as Journey Mapping and Think Aloud Testing, to help educators move from understanding stakeholder needs to practical application. By using these tools, educators can address the root causes of challenges rather than just the symptoms.

NYC Civic Service Design (n.d.). *Tools + Tactics*. [Link to website.](#)

Key findings: Civic Service Design is a framework used by New York City to improve the effectiveness and accessibility of government programs through design tools and methods. The process involves five core phases: setting the stage through research, talking with stakeholders, synthesizing insights, prototyping ideas, and evaluating for impact. It empowers public servants with practical tactics, such as user journey mapping and brainstorming, to mitigate risks and develop better solutions. This initiative, created by the Service Design Studio, is an evolving resource designed to spread best practices across city government.

Why we should read this resource: Public servants should read this resource because it offers a practical, step-by-step guide to incorporating human-centered design into daily government work. It provides a comprehensive set of tools for engaging with New Yorkers to ensure services are built around the actual needs of the people who use them. By following this guide, teams can learn to test ideas in low-risk ways and focus on delivering measurable, positive outcomes for the public.

**Lots more resources on "evaluation" on the GFCF
knowledge page. [Link to website.](#)**

About this Repository

This repository was compiled as a living reference to support funders at any stage of their journey toward more equitable, trust-based grantmaking. It is intended to be returned to, expanded, and shared. Readers are encouraged to suggest additions, flag gaps, and adapt the material for use in internal workshops, board presentations, and partner dialogues.

Version: Jul 2026. This document may be updated as the field develops.