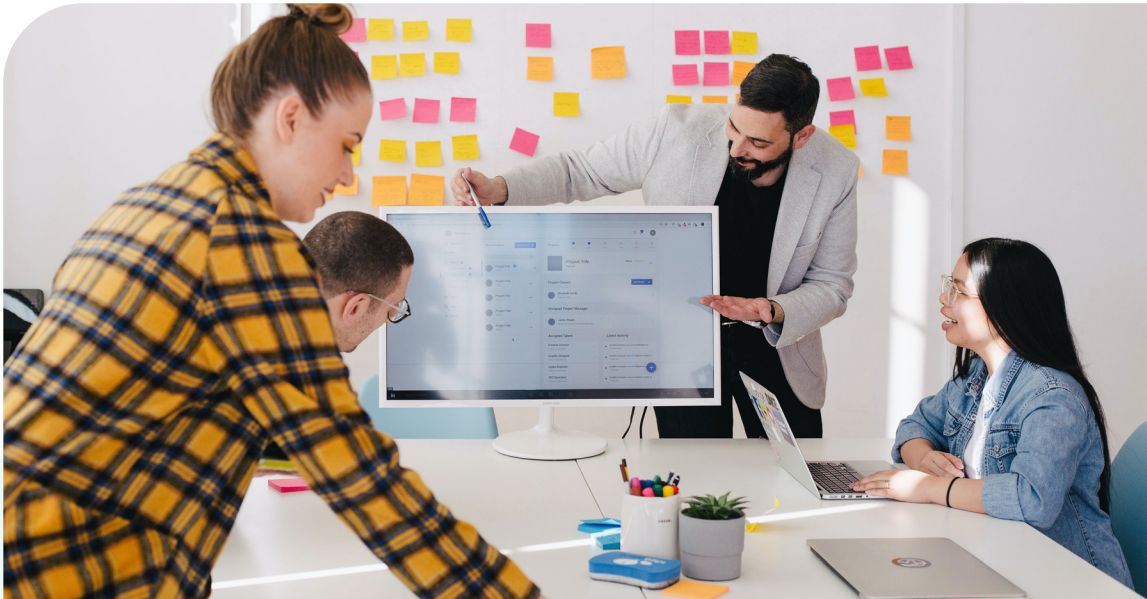


Submittable 

MEASURING SOCIAL IMPACT

A Guide for Grantmakers and CSR Professionals



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Introduction

If you've ever wondered how much impact measurement really matters, look to Florence Nightingale. In the 1850s, she collected data that proved unsanitary hospital conditions were killing patients. And in turn she transformed the field of nursing.

Of course, before Nightingale arrived at the hospital, the staff there was doing the work they thought they needed to do to save lives. But without measuring their impact, they had no idea whether their approach was effective or in fact causing harm.

It's a high-stakes example, but today's philanthropy is exactly that. Whether you're working to address climate change, poverty, racism, hunger, inequality, or another big issue, lives are often on the line.

No matter what role you play in the sphere of social impact, you want to know that the work you do is having a positive effect on the causes you care about. That's why we created this guide—to give you the tools you need to set up your impact measurement right.

In these pages, we'll cover the benefits of measurement as well as principles to guide you. Plus, we lay out step-by-step instructions with expert advice and resources so you can move forward with confidence. Let's get started.





What is impact measurement?

Impact measurement involves taking stock of the **direct and indirect outcomes** created by a social impact program. Measuring your impact allows you to take a step back and understand how your program fits into the broader efforts to make change. You can break down how your program is performing compared to expectations and look for opportunities to do things better.

Running a social impact program without any mechanism for measurement is like trying to build a bridge with your eyes closed. If you can't ever see the full structure, you'll never know whether the work you're doing is creating something lasting that can actually bear weight.

The benefits of measurement

Of course making an effort to understand the scope of your impact is the practical thing to do. It ensures that you're aligning the work you do with your core mission. Measurement can be the difference between building a successful program and one that fails to deliver. Beyond that, measurement allows you to be **dynamic and intentional** about the work you do in the following ways.



• Maximize your impact

You chose your program mission for a reason. The last thing you want is for your investment to be wasted. Measuring impact will give you the tools to assess how your resources are being utilized. Are there components of your program that are more successful than others? Are some of your efforts failing to create the change you intended?

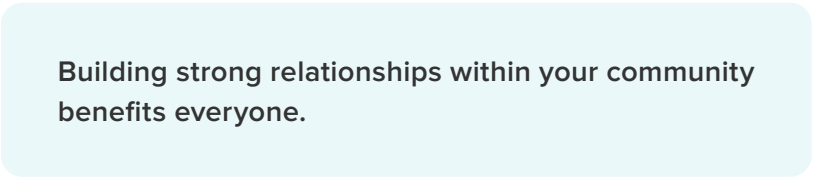
Knowing the answers to these questions will help you decide whether to shift your approach. Perhaps you want to **narrow your focus** to the areas of your program that are working well. Or maybe you want to dig in to understand more deeply why the change you envisioned doesn't match the reality on the ground.

For example, in the early 2000s microcredit was lauded as an incredible tool to fight poverty and empower women. Many corporations and foundations hurried to incorporate this new trend into their CSR strategy. However, at the time, not much research existed on the actual impact of this approach and so nonprofits relied on heavily anecdotal evidence to prove efficacy. To establish clear data, [six randomized evaluations were conducted](#) between 2003 and 2012. The results proved that although microloans increased some metrics such as

business activity, they did not have a significant impact on income, investment in children's education, or an increase in women's empowerment. Facing such truths helps funders direct resources to programs that really work.

Develop stronger connections

One of the best mechanisms for understanding your impact is **feedback from the community** you're serving. Reaching out to them not only gives you a clearer picture of your impact, but it opens up direct lines of communication.



Building strong relationships within your community benefits everyone.

It allows you to tap into an incredible resource of knowledge and ideas while **giving folks a voice** in how your program operates. Forging these meaningful connections will help you build and maintain trust, foster a sense of collaboration, and ensure that you'll be the first to know if problems arise.

[Arts Mid-Hudson](#) is a nonprofit that focuses on providing vision and leadership for arts organizations and artists in New York's Mid-Hudson Valley. When the COVID-19 pandemic shifted how they could interact with their community, they developed a survey to streamline their data collection and strengthen the lines of communication.

“

I use a survey as a way to open the door to speak to your grantee or your awardee. Because then, I can just call them up on the phone and use the information that I see to start off a conversation and figure out what's going on for them and how we can help.”



LILIA PÉREZ

Grants and Program Manager at
Arts Mid-Hudson

Adapt to change

As the world evolves so do the needs of your community. These changes may be sudden or gradual. Perhaps an event or disaster has **reshaped priorities**. Or maybe over time, technical advancements have altered how folks interact with and receive aid.

Change is inevitable. Taking the time to assess your impact means you'll be aware when your program needs to evolve and what the evolution should look like.

The [COVID-19 vaccine rollout](#) in the United States set a perfect backdrop for finding ways to use data to adapt practices. In June 2021, experts noted a big disparity in vaccine access. Across 41 states, 44 percent of white people had at least one dose, compared to only 31 percent of Black people and 35 percent of Hispanic people. Having these metrics encouraged local governments and organizations such as [CORE](#) and [Partners in Health](#) to mobilize in underserved communities. These efforts included mobile vaccination units, walk-up sites, door-to-door campaigns, partnerships with local leaders, mass vaccination events, employing local translators, and more.

Adjust what's not working

Of course when you create and launch your social impact program, you do your best to account for all **possible pain points**. But it's impossible to catch everything before it happens. By regularly checking in, you can adjust what isn't working well.

Catching small issues early prevents little things from ballooning into large problems. Maybe instructions on an application are unclear or confusing. Or there's a kink in the lines of communication. You want to find, identify, and fix these types of issues as quickly as possible.

If there's a larger question about your program's efficacy, you want to know. Maybe the problem you sought to solve is more complex than you realized. Or the solution you implemented has created a new unexpected issue. Either way, measuring impact allows you to collaborate with your team to address any spots where your program is falling short.

The team at [City Year](#), a nonprofit dedicated to providing resources for students to thrive, realized in 2014 that their data collection methods were not as dynamic or as targeted as they

needed to be. Specifically, broad program evaluations didn't actually support the 3,000 Americorps members working in the field. These members needed frequent access to data that would help them monitor an individual student's progress and inform decisions about interventions. As the team at City Year retooled their approach to measurement, they made it a priority to support real-time monitoring for folks in the field. The shift has paid off, with an increase in the number of students receiving support and improved student performance.

Expand programming

If your program is creating meaningful change, you might consider what it would look like to expand it over time. You can consider whether **scaling the program** to extend its reach makes sense. Or instead you could use the **program model as a blueprint** to launch similar campaigns with different focuses.

Effective impact measurement gives you evidence of success so you can plot out a program expansion with confidence. You'll be able to point to what works well and make a plan to incorporate those strategies as you move forward.



Building on Success

The [Sachs Foundation](#) has long been dedicated to providing educational opportunities for Black students in Colorado. Following the success of their scholarship program, the team has worked to expand its programming to make a bigger impact.

Additional efforts include:

- A teacher development program to help increase the number of Black teachers in the state
- Mental health programs for students
- Assistance to support food and housing security

Tell a meaningful story

Stories matter. Whether you're trying to connect to customers or board members, having a story to tell helps. Measuring your impact gives you the chance to understand the effect of your program and distill it into a moving narrative.

Take a look at these three impact reports to see how metrics and stories can be woven together to paint the full picture of a program's impact.

- [DREAM 2020 Year in Review](#)
- [Girls Who Code 2020 Annual Report](#)
- [Charity: Water 2020 Annual Report](#)

As you collect data and feedback from your program, you'll be able to weave it together to create a unique story about the impact you've achieved. This provides a compelling format to communicate to donors, customers, employees, and the public at large about how your approach is making change.



4 guiding principles

Measuring impact should never be an afterthought—it’s integral to the success of your program. Ad hoc attempts to gather data won’t give you the clear picture you need to know whether you’re making lasting change. You want to be intentional about your approach. As you make plans to incorporate impact measurement into your program, keep these strategies in mind.

Start with the end in mind

Effective measurement is rooted in your core mission and shaped by the strategies you deploy. As you build your program, include plans for measuring impact right from the start. This will encourage your team to think about the full scope of your program and consider how each piece can be accurately measured.

Plus, setting up the mechanisms for measurement before you launch your program ensures that you won’t miss out on important metrics. You’ll have a plan of how to collect data and know who is responsible for organizing and analyzing it.

According to Tiger de Souza, People Engagement Director of

National Trust, planning ahead can also save money. “Impact measurement can be made significantly cheaper if you plan from the outset,” he writes. “You must know what change you wish to achieve and understand the outcomes and outputs necessary to achieve your goals. Only then can you set up mechanisms to collect data at the appropriate time.”

If you already have a program in place but you want to be more intentional and strategic about your impact measurement, consider your goals when you started. Be sure to center your approach on your mission. With your program up and running it’s easy to get fixated on measuring the things you’re doing now. But if you don’t step back and look at what you wanted to achieve with your program, you won’t have a sense if you’re actually moving the needle.

For example, let’s say you created a program with the intention to help survivors of domestic abuse. You launched a drive for donations of household goods to help folks get back on their feet, and then you realized that you needed to measure your impact. You look around and say, “look how much stuff we collected,

let's measure that." Though it may be an easy thing to measure, the quantity of your donations doesn't tell you whether you've actually made a difference in the lives of survivors.

Look at the bigger picture

Good impact measurement is about going beyond what you give to understand the **wider context** of your work. Rather than just counting up the amount of money you donated or the number of volunteer hours clocked, you want to measure how those things made a real impact.

Look at the program you're supporting and its effects. For instance, if you gave money to a nonprofit that supports adult literacy programs, don't just count what you put in—find a way to take stock of that program's impact. What did your help enable them to do? Maybe it's about how many people took classes or perhaps with your funding they were able to hire an additional teacher. Knowing how your resources created meaningful change allows you to tell a more complex story.

Be mindful of the outcomes you might not be able to see up close.

Long-term effects will be impossible to see, let alone measure, right away. For instance, an adult literacy program might have an incredibly positive effect on people's employment and educational opportunities. But that's not something you can measure immediately. Find ways to measure those shorter-term outcomes like participation, but make space for the possibility that some aspects of your impact will take much longer to understand. Don't be too quick to pull the plug on a program just because you don't see the changes you hoped for right away.

Center community values

At the heart of your social impact program is the desire to make change by providing something of value to your community. But it's easy to get stuck within your own value system. Instead, you need to work to understand how your program goals **intersect with community needs** and values.

For instance, let's say you want to help a nearby school district improve graduation rates. You decide to launch a tutoring program to provide free assistance to students. In theory, that sounds great. But does a tutoring program align with what the community needs? Is the graduation rate low because students don't have access to tutors or are there other factors at play? Perhaps kids are working

and don't have sufficient time to dedicate to schoolwork. Or maybe they don't have reliable transportation to and from school.

The key is asking the community what they need and listening. Build your program around the community values, even if that means reimagining what you first envisioned. Jerome Tenille, Manager of Social Impact & Volunteerism at Marriott puts it this way: "Take inventory of the communities where you do business and align goals with things that are larger than yourself. If you're a local company, connect with local governance and small community-based organizations to really figure out those critical issues they're trying to solve."

When you measure a program that isn't aligned with a community's values, you'll get data that doesn't mean a whole lot. No matter how many donations you make or volunteer hours you log, if the work is not rooted in the community, you're likely not creating a lasting impact.

Examine the full power of your impact

The main question when it comes to your social impact program is of course **whether you're creating meaningful change** around your cause. But beyond that, there are other [essential questions](#)

that will give you a fuller picture of the value of your program. You want to know if your program is striking the right chord for your team, the community, and the public at large. Part of your measurement should address the effect of your program on

Is your program building trust? Is it focused on causes that feel urgent to others?

your organization from both an **internal and external** standpoint. Is it aligned with the values of your employees, stakeholders, customers, or donors?

You want to know how the public feels about your social impact program. Do they know it exists? Are they enthusiastic about the work you're doing? Take a poll or launch targeted campaigns to measure this. For example, in 2016 Patagonia announced that 100% of their sales on Back Friday would go to grassroots environmental organizations. The team projected sales of \$2 million. In reality, sales topped [\\$10 million](#). This showed just how enthusiastic their customers were about the company's work to support environmental stewardship.

Avoid these common mistakes



Measuring the wrong thing

If you're fixated on the wrong metrics, you'll be building the wrong solutions.



Undervaluing general operating support

Trust organizations to use donations effectively—whether it's for staffing, overhead, or the other operating expenses that support longevity.



Not setting goals for impact measurement

Be clear about what you want to do with your data—whether you'll be using it to inform programmatic decisions, provide information to funders, or prove the efficacy of your model.



Gathering data you don't have the capacity to analyze

Never collect data for the sake of collecting data. Only gather what you have time and resources to analyze and understand.



Making assumptions about correlations between a program and an outcome

The problems you're looking to address are complex—be sure to take into account the other factors contributing to the outcomes you influence.



Ignoring indirect side effects

Your work is not done in a vacuum. Take into account the indirect side effects of your work to get a more complete understanding of your impact.

A step-by-step guide to measuring impact

1 Define success

Before you get started, you want to get a clear picture of how you and your team understand success. Ask yourselves:

- What impact are we trying to make?
- What outcomes do we envision?
- What do we seek to achieve?

Alnoor Ebrahim, author of [*Measuring Social Change: Performance and Accountability in a Complex World*](#), frames the necessity of asking the **foundational questions** this way: “It’s an obvious question, right? But when we get caught up in the day-to-day work of social change, we sometimes forget to ask it...And we need to ask it periodically to make sure that our work is still driven and connected to that end goal. It’s more specific than mission because it asks you to be specific about the needs you’re trying to address and who your most important clients are.”

Clarifying your answers to these questions will help you hone in on the data you need. If success is clearly defined, you can

narrow your focus onto the data that will help you measure the true efficacy of your program.

Include the community in these conversations. If your vision of success doesn’t align with theirs, now is the time to bridge that gap. Ask them what changes they would like to see. Have they seen programs fail or succeed in the past? Do they have thoughts on what strategies would make the most difference? By making these connections early with a focus on collaboration, you’re building an important foundation for your program’s success and longevity.



2 Choose your framework

Choosing a framework gives you the structure for your measurement, allowing you to **set targets** and **assess your performance**. Mark Horoszowski, CEO at MovingWorlds, explains: “What a good framework does is help you actually answer questions like what, how, and why do we measure? Once it is in place, it empowers your team to build more executive support by showing your impact, and also building the case for them to keep investing to hit those targets.”

Depending on your organization, your available resources, and the scope and focus of your efforts, you may choose to use an existing framework, or to create your own.

Creating your own framework

For focused programs, creating a proprietary framework may

be the best way forward. There are several models that can be used as a template to develop your own framework to judge the performance of your social impact program. A few to consider are:

Theory of Change

A [theory of change](#) is a model frequently used by purpose-driven organizations across industries which identifies long-term goals around social progress, and works backward to identify the necessary preconditions which will bring the desired change about.

Logic Model

Similar to a theory of change, a logic model identifies the inputs, activities, and outputs that will lead to the desired short- and long-term outcomes and ultimate impact.

EXAMPLE OF A TYPICAL LOGIC MODEL FOR A LOCAL FOOD BANK

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short-term Outcomes	Long-term Outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Funding• Staff• Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• School lunch program• Weekend meal program• Family grocery box program• Education seminars	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meals provided• People fed• Families assisted• Communities served• Educated individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduction of hunger• Reduction of food insecurity• Reduction of stress• Increase in awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improved quality of life• Improved health• Sustained reduction of poverty

Five Dimensions of Impact

Developed by the Impact Management Project, this model identifies **five dimensions of impact**—what, who, how much, contribution, and risk—across which impacts can be benchmarked and measured.

Using an existing framework

There are many frameworks that have been developed by institutions and academics to tackle the sticky problem of measuring social change. For the most part, these frameworks are designed with corporations in mind, but they are largely applicable for nonprofits and other organizations as well. Here are three possible frameworks to consider:

B Impact Assessment

Developed by B Lab, a nonprofit organization dedicated to using the power of business as a force for good, the [B Impact Assessment](#) helps companies measure their impact on workers, community, environment, and customers, empowering them to assess their performance, compare themselves to peers, and identify areas for improvement. This is a good choice for a for-

profit organization looking to measure the social impact of their organization holistically.

Sustainable Development Goals

The [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) were designed by the United Nations to be a “blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all.” The 17 SDGs span from ending poverty to achieving gender equality to responsible production and consumption, and provide a north star for many organizations to judge progress toward targets.

Principles for Responsible Investing

Developed by the United Nations, the [Principles for Responsible Investing \(PRIs\)](#) offer a model to incorporate Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) factors into investment decisions—an ideal framework for impact investment strategies.

Whether you use an existing framework or borrow a model to come up with your own, choosing a framework is an important precursor to measuring your social impact.

3 Identify your metrics

The best social impact metrics to track and measure for your program will be rooted in your definition of success and will be based on (1) the **framework** you select and (2) the **scope** of your program. As a general rule, the more focused your program, the more straightforward the metrics to be measured.

Center your measurement strategy on metrics you can reasonably measure. “There’s a tendency within the social sector—whether it’s nonprofits or foundations or businesses with a social purpose—to try and measure long-term outcomes on society,” Alnoor Ebrahim says. This tendency can lead organizations to focus on outcomes that don’t necessarily make sense for their work.

Diving deeper, we’ll follow a basic logic model framework of outputs and **short- and long-term outcomes** to break down the kinds of metrics you may consider.

Outputs

Outputs are **indicators of change**. They are the direct, short-term measurements of your program’s activities. Let’s take an example of an organization—it could be for-profit, nonprofit, or government—that runs a social impact program partnering with a local food bank.

In this table you can see the activities, direct efforts, and direct outputs of the program.

Activities

- Makes a quarterly donation
- Contributes employee volunteers
- Hosts an annual education session for employees

Direct Efforts

- Number of hours volunteered
- Amount donated
- Percent of employees attending education session

Direct Outputs

- Number of meals provided
- Number of people fed
- Percent of communities impacted within the state
- Number of people educated

Measuring outputs allow you to see the immediate impact of your work. It's a relatively straightforward process, but it doesn't quite tell the whole story of your impact.

Outcomes

As your program objective evolves in scope, or you look to measure the longer term, broader impact of your program—"outcomes" in a logic model—the metrics to consider become more complex.

This is partly due to the fact that outcomes are typically the

result of efforts that extend beyond your organization's program. Therefore, while you may be able to participate in some direct measurement yourself, you'll likely also borrow data provided by outside sources.

Here, the food bank and the organization that partnered with the food bank could share a set of desired **short-term outcomes**. As you begin to measure **long-term outcomes**, it becomes increasingly likely that you'll need to rely upon data sets provided by entities such as governments, nonprofits, or consultants.



Short-Term Outcomes

- Reduction of hunger
- Reduction of food insecurity
- Reduction of stress
- Increase in awareness of food insecurity



Long-Term outcomes

- Improved quality of life for members of served community
- Improved health for members of served community
- Sustained reduction of poverty in the community at large

Specific metrics which could indicate progress toward these broad, long-term objectives could include:

- Percent of children graduating from high school
- Teen pregnancy rates
- Divorce rates
- Median household income (poverty level)
- Unemployment rates
- Disease and undernourishment rates

Such metrics might be mined from sources which include, for the United States:

- [United States Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)
- [United States Department of Public Health and Human Services](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [The National Center for Education Statistics](#)

A few international sources include:

- [The Economist Quality of Life Index](#)
- [The World Health Organization](#)
- [UN Data](#)

When it comes to identifying metrics for your social impact, the more focused your program, the easier to measure your impact (and the easier to do so yourself). As goals grow in scope, judging your performance becomes a piece of a larger puzzle. Framing your goals around both short- and long-term metrics will help you craft a program strategy that addresses the full scope of the causes you care about.

4 Consider your timeline

In the same way you want to be deliberate about how and when you launch your program, you want to approach measurement with the same intentionality. Your timeline should balance the **urgency of your mission** with the **patience required** to make lasting gains.

The full effect of your program won't be measurable right away. But that doesn't mean you should wait. Set up a plan now, keeping in mind that each metric tells a unique piece of the story. Certain outcomes will require more time and even some flexibility. Consider, as thought leader [Neil Buddy Shah](#) warned at a panel on impact measurement, that good ideas risk “failing” if held to too rigorous a benchmark at too early a date. The key is identifying the right timeline.

Obviously longer-term outcomes won't be measurable right away, but other data you'll want to collect as immediately as possible. For example, if you plan to solicit feedback from program participants, you don't want to wait too long. You want to hear their perspectives while they're fresh since the details of their experiences might fade with time.

Submittable makes it easy to check in with grantees using a survey that includes options to upload testimonials in a variety of formats, including text, video, audio, and images.

You also want to set a schedule to consistently measure your program results. Just because something is working well at first doesn't mean it will continue to do so indefinitely. Whether you're tracking program activities, employee involvement, community sentiment, outputs, or longer-term gains, you want to have a **dedicated timeline** for measurement. Consider what kind of cadence makes sense for each metric, whether monthly, quarterly, or annually. Value consistency, but **be mindful not to overburden your staff or community members** with constant check-ins.

Six Month Survey

Organization name *

How are things going? We'd love to know what's working, what isn't, and what changes you're making along the way.

Please upload any community testimonials (photos, videos, or audio clips) that will help us understand your progress so far.

Choose File

Select up to 10 files to attach. No files have been attached yet. You may add 10 more files.

Acceptable file types: .gif, .jpg, .jpeg, .png, .svg, .tif, .tiff, .aac, .aiff, .flac, .m4a, .mp3, .ogg, .wav, .wma, .3gp, .avi, .flv, .m4v, .mkv, .mov, .mp4, .mpeg, .webm, .wmv

5 Understand the larger context

Your program exists in a complex world that is constantly evolving.

Taking time to understand the other forces at play will help you get a clearer picture of how your program's work fits into the broader context.

Considering **your attribution**—or the degree to which your specific actions have brought about results—to a particular purpose or benefit is a part of honestly measuring the impact of your program. UNICEF's brief on [Strategies for Causal Attribution](#) digs into why understanding attribution is so central. "Causal attribution is an essential element of any impact evaluation. It enables an evaluation to report not only that a change occurred, but also that it was due, at least in part, to the programme or policy being evaluated," writes Patricia Rogers.

As a general rule, the longer the term of impact that you measure, the more limited any one activity or program's attribution.

For instance, let's take the outcome objective of a reduction of

food insecurity as explored in the food bank example. Perhaps in 2020, the food bank met all its benchmarks on its output metrics. Yet, after meeting each of its direct goals, the food bank saw reduced performance compared to 2019 amidst all of their short- and long- term outcome objectives. What gives?

While admittedly an extreme example, this clarifies the point—as we all know, in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc quite universally on the health and wellbeing of communities across the world.

Taking attribution into account in this example isn't at all to suggest that the food bank failed. In fact, it's highly likely that without the food bank's efforts, hunger, food insecurity, and related health outcomes might have deteriorated far more than they did with the food bank providing a safety net.

Understanding attribution, of course, **cuts both ways**. It's equally important that organizations not assume too much attribution for positive outcomes to which they may not have contributed, or only partially contributed.

From a perspective of creating the most positive change, claiming too much credit for outcomes would be a false indicator of the effectiveness of a program. This would be dishonest and misleading for stakeholders. It could also lend a sense of complacency, and cause a missed opportunity to improve upon a program that is only somewhat effective.

Of course, understanding attribution is not a perfect science. Still, assessing the larger landscape can help you paint a more accurate picture of your role in progress toward your longer term objectives. To estimate attribution, consider:

- Activities by organizations or individuals you actively partner with in your work
- Activities by other entities independent of your efforts, but with the same or overlapping goals or results
- Macroeconomic, political, public health, or forces of nature which may influence outcomes

These kinds of questions can give you a better understanding of your attribution toward short- and long-term goals. Understanding attribution doesn't mean discounting the legitimate impacts of your program. Rather, it means that to get an accurate (and honest) measurement, you must put your work in the appropriate context.



6 Create an accountability plan

Putting the time and effort into measuring impact doesn't mean much if you don't have an accountability plan.

How will you hold your feet to the fire?

Including the community in impact reporting is a great mechanism for accountability. **Making your goals public** not only engages more folks in the work you're doing, it ensures that you'll go beyond the data to understand your program's successes and failures.

Making a public pledge is one way to embrace accountability. For instance, the [Kresge Foundation](#) launched their "25% by '25" initiative in 2019, pledging that by 2025, one-quarter of its U.S. assets under management will be invested in female and diverse-owned firms. Instead of keeping this plan internal, they've announced it widely and they'll have stakeholders and donors to answer to should they fall short. This is a great motivator and lever for accountability. By setting a specific goal with a hard deadline, they have built a framework to measure their progress.

Going public with goals is great, but organizations should be truly committed to the work. Consumers have become adept at understanding the difference between a true effort to make change and a hollow marketing ploy. Take Nestle for example. The company released [a statement](#) in 2018 announcing its "ambitions to make 100% of its packaging recyclable or reusable by 2025." Greenpeace and other activists called the company out for failing to set clear targets, and in 2020 Nestle was still one of the top three polluters according to [#breakfreefromplastic's report](#).

When it comes to accountability, **transparency is key**. You want to celebrate your program achievements—give shoutouts and share positive results. This keeps folks engaged, excited, and inspired. But alongside that, you want to be honest about any shortcomings and create a clear plan to address them.

Sometimes going outside of your organization is necessary. [Artist Trust](#), a nonprofit dedicated to supporting artists across Washington State, set public intentions around racial equity. Rather than relying on their internal team to measure progress,

they hired an outside expert to conduct an audit of their work. Program Manager Lydia Boss explains, “We needed to hire an expert from outside of the organization to really come in and do a top to bottom look at our work and our aspirations and our goals, and allow this person to come in, get to know us, also get to know artists in our community, which is going to be a big part of the audit—and help us to think critically about all aspects of our work.”

Accountability is essential for the health and longevity of your program. If your plan is rooted in **humility and honesty**, it will go a long way in building trust with community members, employees, and customers.

7 Find inspiration in others doing the same work

You are not alone in your work. Other organizations are out there pushing toward similar goals. **Looking outward** can provide a spark for you and your team. Check out other programs and reach out to folks doing the work. They might have unique insights to offer.

In social impact work, a **collaborative spirit** is essential. If other organizations have implemented successful measurement or accountability strategies, take note. Perhaps pieces of their program can serve as a model for yours. Check out these resources for some inspiration:

- [25 social impact examples from brands committed to change](#)
- [Innovations for Poverty Action's case studies](#)
- [Impact Project Management's resources and examples](#)
- [Stanford Social Innovation Review's articles on impact measurement](#)

You're not looking to replicate what others are doing; you want to have a **distinct approach** that is unique to your organization and mission. As you incorporate new strategies, consider how your team brings a unique set of skills and perspective to the work.

8 Gather qualitative and quantitative data

It's easy to get caught up in the numbers, but you want to make space for the stories too. When it comes to measuring impact, you want to **center people**. Find ways to gather the narratives from folks involved in your program.

Oral and video reporting are great ways to let folks tell their stories in their own words. Whether you call them directly or you allow them to submit a recording, hearing them articulate your program's impact can be invaluable. It'll give you a deeper understanding, plus it provides a compelling story to share your impact with your stakeholders. This kind of open communication will also help build **lasting relationships**.

As part of their work to connect with the community, Artist Trust makes it a priority to chat with grantees on a regular basis to discuss their work. The nonprofit has moved away from formal reporting requirements and embraced a relationship-based approach.

Surveys can be a great way to reach out and get feedback. Make sure you include some short open-ended questions, so respondents can share freely. No one wants to choose from a list of multiple choice answers if none quite capture the full story.

“

I believe that for sure, numbers play a big part in how we're talking about things and how we're doing the 'work', but also understanding that experience is also as qualitative [important] as numbers and numerical impact. And so understanding that even though we're not asking [grantees] to report what they're doing, we're just asking them how they're doing, what is going on with them, how their art making is going. That's also important as we've got x amount of numbers doing x amount of things.



LUTHER HUGHES
Artist Trust , Program Manager



7 principles for asking smart questions

As you reach out to grantees and program participants for feedback, let these principles guide you.

Prioritize the work

You provide support to make a difference for your community, not so program participants can spend all their time filling out your forms and collecting data. Make sure that the measurement of your program does not overtake the important work at its core.

Do your part

Do the research, find publicly available data, and make verbal check-ins part of your process to minimize the work for your grantees.

Center people

Keep the human element of the work at the forefront—remember not everything can be boiled down to a data point. Make questions open-ended and give folks room to tell their stories in their own words.

Embrace the complexity

Impact is complex and multi-faceted. Avoid the temptation to look for a neat, linear story and instead acknowledge the complexity of the issues you're working to address.

Think holistically

Be careful not to think of your program as an island. It is intertwined with the other work you do as well as efforts from other organizations.

Be humble

Stay open to feedback and seek out opportunities to keep learning. Be sure to include folks from the community to help you define success.

Apply an equity lens

Interrogate existing frameworks and be active in pursuing equity across all parts of your program—from your application review process to which grantees you support.

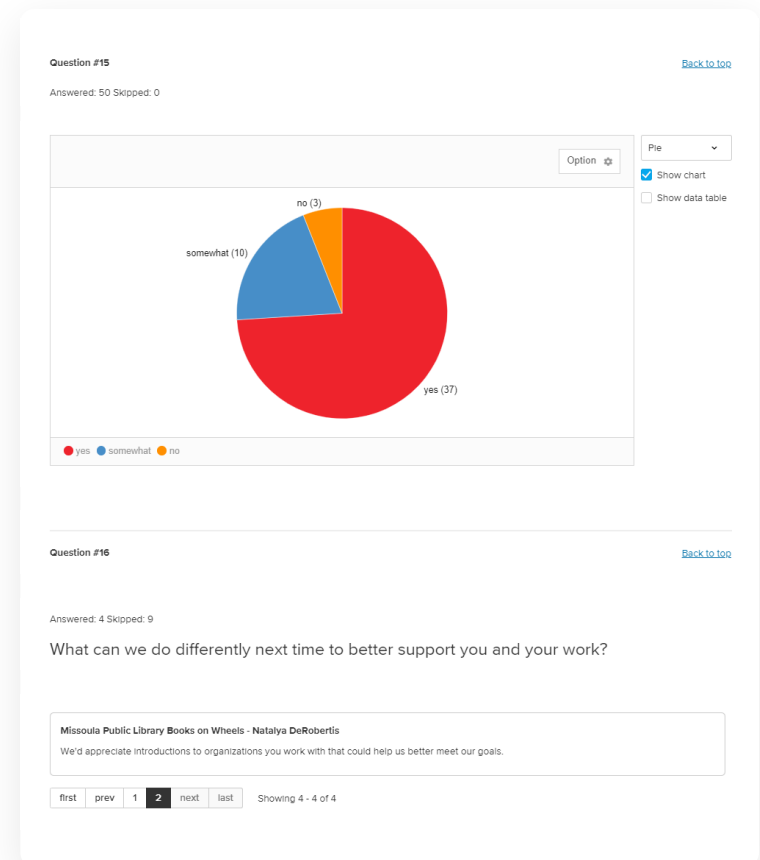
9 Be open to feedback

In measuring the impact of your program, you might find some information that surprises you. Some of the feedback you get might even be difficult to hear. A lot of work goes into launching and managing your social impact program, and when things don't go as planned, it can be disheartening.

However, **seeking guidance from the community** and truly listening to what they say will strengthen your program and your organization as a whole. This is how you learn to be dynamic, to problem solve, and to own up to any mistakes you make.

Stay open to feedback. Avoid becoming defensive, and instead try to approach the process from a place of humility. You and your team don't know everything and that's okay. Make the effort to continue learning as you go.

For example, the [Barr Foundation](#) made an effort to seek grantee feedback through an anonymous survey. After receiving mixed results, they sought to address the top three complaints. Grantees reported that the application and reporting processes were too complicated and confusing, that the foundation staff was not accessible enough, and that the grant structure was too inflexible. In response, the Barr Foundation team set new priorities to address these issues and framed it as an opportunity to improve the experience for the nonprofits they support.



With Submittable's impact reporting, you can collect and analyze feedback to help guide your future program decisions.

10 Use data to make changes and reimagine what's possible

You've made the effort to gather feedback, both qualitative and quantitative. You've opened up lines of communication and built lasting relationships. But none of that means much if you don't **use that data to act**.

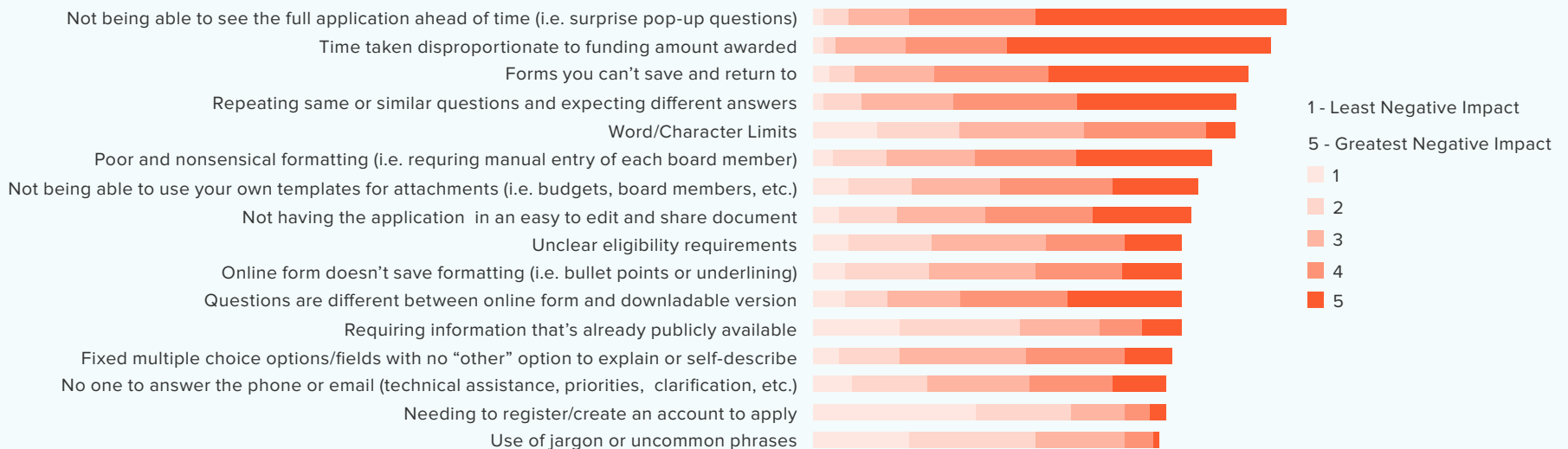
Analyze what you've heard from program participants and community members to **identify pain points or wasted efforts** and then work with your team to find solutions. Sometimes small tweaks can make a big difference.

For instance, the [#FixTheForm](#) movement launched by Kari

Aanestad and Laura Solomons has gathered feedback from more than 500 grant seekers. They have identified the biggest pain points in the grants application process. Now that this information is public, funders can work to reimagine their procedures to align with the data from the grantees and make things easier on those they seek to serve.

Remember to **be patient**. Don't restructure your entire program based on the first round of feedback. Some pieces might take time. But you should be open to reimagining your approach along the way to maximize your positive impact.

#FIXTHEFORM FULL RESULTS



11 Find opportunities to expand your program

Once your program is up and running and you've had the chance to collect and analyze the data to understand what's working best, you want to think about ways to **expand your reach**. Would it serve the community to increase the capacity of your existing program? With the evidence of success, you'll have a great case for asking for more resources from your organization's leaders.

If scaling up your program doesn't make sense, consider how you might use your program model to tackle other pressing issues. Perhaps you've created a blueprint that you can use to initiate additional programs.

You can also tap into outside resources. Now that you've positioned yourself as a trusted community partner, you can launch fundraising campaigns to bolster your efforts. Or you can look for other organizations that may want to team up.

Leveraging the data you collect to make an even wider impact ensures that you're investing time and money into **proven strategies**. Not only does this empower you to be a steward of your community, you can serve as a good example for others looking to engage in similar work.

Dave's Killer Bread is one company that has embodied this work. The team has long been dedicated to providing Second Chance Employment opportunities to folks with a criminal history. However, they expanded their reach in 2015 by launching the [Dave's Killer Bread Foundation](#) to help inspire the business community to implement Second Chance Employment more widely and to serve as a resource for others engaged in this work.

Use the right tools to streamline your impact measurement

As essential as impact measurement is, the last thing you want is to divert time and resources away from the important programmatic work you're doing. Look to leverage tools that simplify data collection, analysis, and reporting.

Submittable is a [social impact platform](#) that allows you to incorporate impact measurement into your plan right from the start. With robust features that streamline data analysis, you can track results and build dynamic reports right in the platform. Find out more today.





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