



The Social and Solidarity Economy: From the Margins to the Mainstream

Case study

Establishing a baseline for “good enough” impact measurement

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COMMON APPROACH
TO IMPACT MEASUREMENT

ESTABLISHING A BASELINE FOR “GOOD ENOUGH” IMPACT MEASUREMENT

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Context and description:

The absence of a common approach to measure and report on non-financial impact is a barrier to the success of the social and solidarity economy. The Common Approach to Impact Measurement is a Canadian-based initiative that is focused on helping to remove this barrier through the creation of four impact measurement standards, alongside a community to drive them forward.

Founded in response to recommendations made by an Ontario government task force in 2017, the project is now housed out of Canada's Capital University – Carleton University – with funding from a mix of government and private donor sources. While the organization's initial focus has centered on the Canadian landscape, its standards are being developed with an eye to flexibility such that they can be applied on a global scale, allowing for a meaningful diversity of voices to be expressed.

The Common Approach believes that a more responsive and relevant approach to impact measurement can promote the social and solidarity economy's vitality and growth by improving transparency, reducing transaction costs and inefficiency, enabling the aggregation of data, and fueling the sharing of information and leading practices amongst practitioners and policy makers (KPMG and Government of Ontario, 2017).

A common approach must be simple, yet the work of achieving simplicity is hard. It means bringing together collective knowledge and expertise to understand best practices, create and maintain new technology, and build a community of actors that is committed to advancing the field of impact measurement, including social purpose organizations, funders and impact investors, trainers, consultants, and software developers.

The focus of this case study is on the first of the Common Approach's four standards, the Common Foundations. Work on this standard began in 2018, with an initial public release happening in early 2019 and a second release planned for Fall 2021.

Main objectives:

The Common Foundations offer guidance for how to measure impact, serving as a knowledge building and behaviour change tool for the social and solidarity economy. The Common Foundations do not prescribe what to measure. This affords flexibility for social purpose organizations to work with their beneficiaries to determine the most suitable measures of change.

The Common Foundations set the stage for three further Common Approach standards that are enabling the collection, aggregation and sharing of impact and impact-related data in streamlined ways. They are designed to “cut through the noise” of a multitude of impact measurement tools and frameworks so that social purpose organizations can meet a minimum standard and know that their impact measurement practices are “good enough.”

While many existing tools articulate an ideal or aspirational state, the Common Approach

believes that this can create a sense of inadequacy or “impact shame,” contributing to feelings of dread and negativity around measurement. By articulating a minimum floor, the Common Foundations enable social purpose organizations to get to “good enough.” From there, they can confidently improve their impact measurement practices using additional resources that are tailored to their unique needs.

Activities:

In identifying the Common Foundations, the Common Approach worked with leaders in Canada and globally to review over 500 impact measurement approaches, including the work of the GECES (“Groupe d’Experts de la Commission sur l’Entrepreneuriat Social”) and TIESS (“Territoires innovants en économie sociale et solidaire”) (Common Approach to Impact Measurement, 2019) .

The resulting Common Foundations reflect the similarities across these varying methods, summarized as follows: 1. Plan your change; 2. Use performance measures; 3. Collect useful information; 4. Gauge your impact; and 5. Communicate results. They include a “step zero,” encouraging organizations to reflect on whether impact measurement is right for them. The Common Foundations are published in English and French.

The Common Approach also worked with key partners, including the Social Enterprise Institute, to develop and launch bilingual companion resources for social purpose organizations to learn about the Common Foundations and how they can be applied in their work. Resources include a free online self- assessment tool and introductory videos on each essential practice, along with more in-depth, fee-based training and one-on-one coaching.

To help raise awareness of the standard in the Canadian ecosystem, the Common Approach created a “Champions” group, currently made up of seven impact evaluators, trainers, and consultants who are promoting the Common Foundations in their networks. Additional awareness-raising activities include ongoing social media campaigning and public webinars.

Key success factors:

Key to the Common Approach’s success thus far has been its inclusive, community-driven approach. The Common Approach believes that a standard is a community more than a document and that a standard becomes strong and effective only through a persistent focus on community building.

The Common Approach community is now made up of a vast and expanding network of partners and supporters, including the Champions group, a national social purpose organizations advisory committee, a social funders advisory board, and a newly formed board of directors, among others. Each of these groups is playing a foundational role in the launch of the Common Approach, helping to set the stage for widespread adoption of its standards.

The work of the Common Approach would not be possible without the support of

government and private donors, including the Government of Ontario and the Government of Canada. Together, these partners have committed approximately \$2 Million in funding since 2018.

Impact and unexpected implications:

Early feedback from social purpose organizations indicates that use of the Common Foundations and supporting tools is leading to the intended change. Organizations that complete the self-assessment and training modules gain confidence in their impact measurement practices, counteracting impact shame. One community member describes their experience this way:

The Common Foundations self-assessment and online course have been invaluable for us. Both resources clearly mapped out the process of impact measurement while guiding us to break down essential practices into actionable steps. The questions in the assessment provoked reflections about where we are as a small start up and the online course guided us in mapping out how we might work to meet the attainable minimum standard.

Capacity builders, like the Center for Social Innovation, are now incorporating the Common Foundations into their training program as a minimum standard for “good enough” impact measurement.

Lessons learned for other places/locations:

Building a community around a standard takes time and effort. Simple, but not easy. Taking the time to identify early adopters who can serve as standard advocates is crucial to unlocking future potential. It's also important to maintain a common community language, while not losing sight of unique cultural contexts. As the Common Approach grows, its communication activities will likewise need to expand to ensure relevance for audiences outside of Canada.

Another key component of community building involves standard governance. The Common Approach is empowering its user community to drive the ongoing evolution of the standard, investing time to create corresponding governance processes, protocols and practices, and structuring its operations to maintain this framework over time.

This work affords the social and solidarity economy with an opportunity to participate in a robust impact measurement community and to find a sense of ease in measurement while building upon progress over time.

Interested in more about the Common Approach or joining our community?

Visit commonapproach.org or contact us at info@commonapproach.org.

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