



## CIRW 2024 – Key Takeaways #5

# MONITORING AND EVALUATION FOR LEARNING

RCF demonstrates its commitment to effective grant-making through a balanced approach to Monitoring, Evaluation, FOR Learning (MEL) that serves both grantee and donor needs. Recognizing that ISP-led networks operate in complex environments where change is often non-linear and difficult to measure, RCF actively re-imagines and collaboratively adapts its MEL systems to capture meaningful progress while meeting accountability requirements. Through the 2024 CIRW, RCF and partner networks together explored how to document advocacy impacts, measure community-led advocacy, and demonstrate value to donors without overburdening networks. This collaborative approach reflects RCF's role as an intermediary funder committed to both rigorous oversight of resources and supporting ISP-led networks to tell their stories of change through the decolonial lens of lived experience.

## Key Challenges

**Multiple Accountability Streams:** Networks must respond to various donor requirements, each with different frameworks, indicators, and reporting cycles, creating administrative burden. Many networks report to 5–10 different donors, each with unique templates, timelines, and measurement approaches. This multiplicity drains organizational resources and can fragment learning processes.

**Evidence Standards Mismatch:** Traditional donor requirements for quantitative metrics often don't align with the complex, qualitative nature of advocacy and community-led change. Donors may demand direct attribution and numerical targets while real progress happens through indirect influence, relationship building, and gradual policy shifts that are harder to quantify.

**Resource Investment Balance:** Organizations struggle to allocate resources between MEL activities and program implementation, particularly with limited core funding. Staff often must choose between documenting work and doing it, especially when MEL activities are under-budgeted in project grants or require specialized expertise not funded by donors.

**Documentation of Advocacy:** Capturing interim wins and indirect contributions to policy change requires nuanced approaches not typically supported by standard reporting templates. Networks struggle to demonstrate how their activities contribute to long-term systemic change, especially in hostile environments where progress may mean preventing negative changes.

**Capacity Constraints:** Many networks lack dedicated MEL staff or systems, making it difficult to meet extensive documentation requirements. Limited technical expertise in evaluation methodologies, data analysis, and reporting tools creates additional barriers to effective documentation and learning.

**Time-Impact Disconnect:** Short grant cycles often demand impact reporting before meaningful change can be demonstrated or measured. The mismatch between funding cycles (often 1–2 years) and the time needed for advocacy impact (often 5–10 years) creates artificial pressure to show results prematurely.

ISP-led networks face significant challenges in balancing donor accountability requirements with meaningful documentation of their work, particularly in advocacy and rights-based programming where change is complex and long-term. These challenges are exacerbated by limited resources, multiple competing demands, and evaluation frameworks that may not match the reality of their work.



## Successful Strategies

**Streamlined Reporting Systems:** Developing integrated reporting templates that serve multiple donor requirements while maintaining rigor and usefulness for networks. This includes creating shared indicator banks, aligned reporting timelines, and flexible formats that can be adapted for different donors while reducing duplicate effort.

**Capacity Strengthening:** Building internal MEL expertise within networks while providing external technical support when needed. This includes training on data collection tools, evaluation methodologies, and storytelling techniques, alongside mentoring and peer learning opportunities.

**Storytelling and Narrative Documentation:** Moving beyond data sheets to prioritize stories of change, using digital platforms and social media for real-time documentation, and capturing informal day-to-day learnings through digital diaries and short videos. These methods help demonstrate the human impact of advocacy work.

**Participatory Evaluation Approaches:** Incorporating people with lived experiences in governance bodies and evaluation processes, using community scorecard tools for service assessment, and creating youth and community advisory panels that guide what and how to measure progress. This ensures evaluation reflects community priorities and knowledge.

**Collaborative Learning:** Creating spaces for networks to share evaluation approaches and adapt tools to their contexts. Regular learning exchanges, both virtual and in-person, enable networks to problem-solve common challenges and adapt successful approaches from peers.

**Adaptive Measurement of Success:** Recognizing “success” as maintaining existing gains, focusing on service creation and systemic changes, and tracking policy reforms and meaningful community engagement.

RCF partners are working to transform MEL from an extractive process to a collaborative, empowering mechanism that centers community knowledge and experiences. Utilizing participatory approaches and narrative-driven documentation, networks are recognizing that meaningful change is often best understood through lived experiences rather than just quantitative metrics. These documentation methods acknowledge the interconnected nature of social change, moving beyond siloed, linear reporting to capture more holistic insights. Importantly, adaptive success metrics recognize that progress in challenging contexts is often about resilience, survival, and incremental systemic shifts rather than dramatic changes.

## Common Pitfalls

### Lack of MEL Planning from Program Inception

Effective MEL requires thoughtful design, clear indicator development, and stakeholder alignment right from the program’s initial planning stages. Without this proactive approach, organizations and networks find themselves retrofitting evaluation mechanisms that are often disconnected from the program’s actual dynamics and objectives.

### Lack of meaningful engagement of communities in MEL processes

This goes beyond simple consultation, requiring intentional, structured approaches that center community voices, perspectives, and experiences. Meaningful participation means creating accessible, culturally sensitive methods for communities to provide feedback, share their understanding of program impacts, and contribute to ongoing learning and improvement. It involves designing evaluation processes that respect local knowledge, address power dynamics, and provide real opportunities for communities to shape how program success is understood and measured.

## Quick Assessment Questions

*These questions can be used to identify gaps in your approach to MEL*

Are we effectively capturing contribution to change rather than just attribution?

How do we ensure language justice in our MEL processes?

Are our documentation practices sustainable given our resources?

What methods are we using to document and share stories of change?

REFLECT  
ON...

How are community members involved in designing and implementing our MEL processes?

Are our evaluation methods capturing nuanced, incremental changes in advocacy work?

Do our reporting tools reflect lived experiences and community perspectives?

How are we balancing funder accountability requirements with meaningful learning?

## CIRW 2024 Key discussion takeaways: MEL

Traditional monitoring and evaluation approaches were not adequately capturing the reality of network impacts, particularly in challenging contexts. Networks faced complex donor reporting requirements that consumed significant resources, while important day-to-day learnings and community experiences were often missed.

Networks responded by developing creative, community-centered approaches to MEL. Some implemented documentary-style reporting, digital diaries through social media, and cross-network learning sessions. Other networks developed scorecards for service feedback, while others focused on storytelling approaches.

These adaptations led to more meaningful measurement of impact. Networks reported better capture of incremental progress, stronger community engagement in evaluation, and more authentic documentation of both challenges and successes. They also re-defined success itself – in some contexts, maintaining existing services during difficult times was recognized as a significant achievement.

CIRW discussions demonstrated that effective MEL processes can balance donor accountability with community learning when networks are empowered to develop context-appropriate approaches.

*“At one point we had to report monthly on 7 different tools – eventually reporting around what you do becomes more important and time consuming than being able to actually do...”*

*“...We enjoy stories a lot, we communicate through stories and it is so much more impactful than presenting a fact sheet with data.”*

*“If things don’t get worse (this is how we see success); if we are able to hold the line...we see this as success.”*



## Resources & Further Readings

This document explores the complexities of advocacy evaluation. It argues against the search for simple, clear-cut answers in advocacy work, emphasizing instead the need to embrace uncertainty and complexity. The authors propose six key adjustments to improve advocacy monitoring, evaluation, and learning, such as factoring in uncertainty, planning for unpredictability, and redefining contribution.

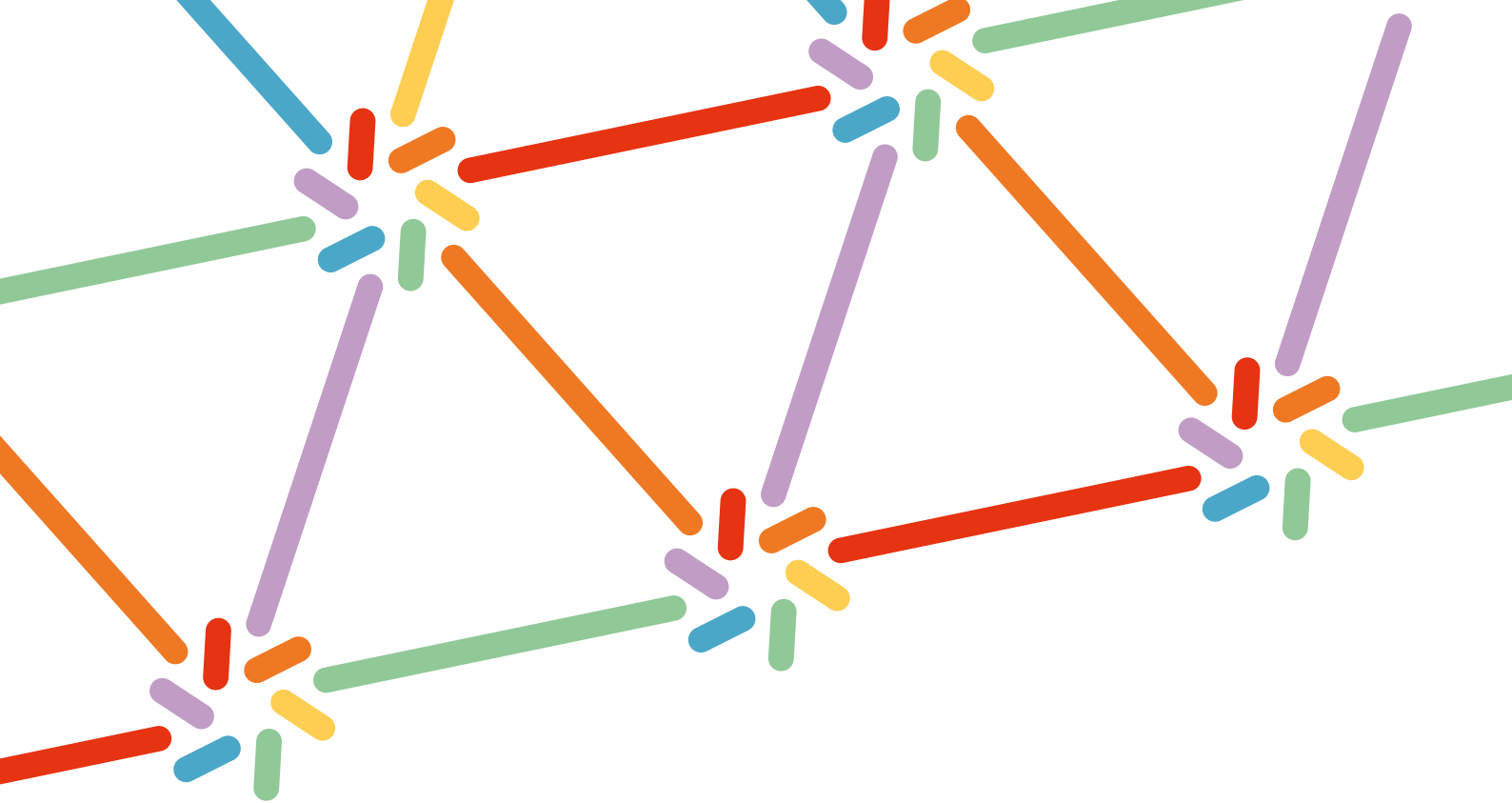
Center for Evaluation Innovation. February 2019. [No Royal Road: Finding and Following the Natural Pathways in Advocacy Evaluation.](#)

This document provides a useful overview of how to assess the contribution of advocacy activities, including practical steps and consideration, it also includes further resources for MEL for advocacy.

INTRAC. 2020. [Contribution to Advocacy Outcomes.](#)

## Looking Forward: RCF's Monitoring and Evaluation for Learning

RCF recognizes that effective MEL systems must continuously evolve to meet both donor accountability requirements and grantee needs. During the 2025–2027 grant period, RCF will actively engage with grantees to co-create improved MEL mechanisms that better capture the complexity of ISP-led advocacy work while streamlining reporting requirements. This collaborative process will inform the development of enhanced MEL systems for future grant cycles, reflecting RCF's commitment to being a learning organization that values community wisdom and adapts its practices based on partner experiences.



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