



THE COMMON IMPACT DATA STANDARD

An Introduction

The Common Impact Data Standard makes it easier to share and aggregate data.

If you are looking to learn more about the Common Impact Data Standard, but you are new to data ontologies—basically, if you are not a data scientist or a software developer—this document is a great place to begin.

What is the Common Impact Data Standard?

The Common Impact Data Standard is a standardized way to represent an organization's impact model and five dimensions of impact. We use the term impact model to refer to any way that an organization illustrates its impact strategy. Theory of change, logic model, outcomes chain, and impact thesis are all examples of impact models. The five dimensions of impact—who, what, how much, contribution and risk—are part of the impact norms developed by the Impact Management Project and are now housed at Impact Frontiers. Standardizing how impact models and impact dimensions are represented in data enables the exchange of impact information between organizations without standardizing the measures and measurements.

The Common Impact Data Standard is a way to represent impact data.

The data standard ensures impact data is represented in specified ways that computers and data engineers can understand. These specific representations can be used to create a database. You can think of “representation” as an organization system for impact data. It ensures a place for everything and everything in its place.

In basic terms, the Common Impact Data Standard says,

“There are these things called **outcomes**; therefore the database needs an *object* called **outcome**.

Each **outcome** should have at least one **indicator**. **Indicators** are another kind of *object*.

An **indicator** can relate to more than one **outcome**. So, each **indicator** *object* has many-to-many relationships with the **outcome** *objects*.



Indicators have **methods**. There should be an *object* called **method**.

Indicators have **indicator reports**. An **indicator report** is the measurement of the **indicator** at a specific **time** and **place**. There should be an *object* called **indicator report** and each **indicator report** should be associated with an *object* that specifies the **time** and an *object* that describes the **place**.

And so on and so on.

The Common Impact Data Standard is an organizing system for your impact data.

The Common Impact Data Standard does not say what the outcomes or indicators should be, just where and how that information should be recorded into a database. It is an organizing system. You might imagine a tool wall in a garage with outlines specifying where to put all the tools one might ever need; it does not tell you exactly what type of hammer or saw to use but shows where whichever one is selected can be stored. Except, in this case, it is not tools but types of impact data; rather than hammers and saws, it is indicators and outcomes.

Like a well-thought-out tool wall, there is a place for everything so it's easy to identify where things go and compare this tool collection to other, similarly organized tool collections.



The Common Impact Data Standard makes it easy to store, share, aggregate and analyze impact data. And because we did our homework, you can feel confident that this organizing system will accommodate your data needs as your organization continues to evolve its impact measurement.



Who should use this data standard?

The short answer to “who is the data standard for” is “everyone.” Sort of.

The Common Impact Data Standard can be used by any organization that measures its impact. It works with the resources you are already using, including outcomes frameworks, standardized metrics, and activity codelists.

Some of the frameworks that you can populate the Common Impact Data Standard with are:

- SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals)
- Canadian Index of Wellbeing
- IRIS+
- SROI (Social Return on Investment)
- GRI (Global Reporting Initiative)
- SASB (Sustainability Accounting Standards Board)
- Impact Weighted accounts
- Your own custom-created systems

How to start using the Common Impact Data Standard

We say the Common Impact Data Standard is “sort of” for everyone to use because “use” is a bit of a funny word in this context.

Organizations do not need to deeply understand the Common Impact Data Standard in order to “use” it and benefit from it. To “use” or “adopt” the data standard, they need to use impact measurement software and databases that have aligned with the Common Impact Data Standard. Essentially, Common Approach wants all organizations to use the data standard but without even really knowing they are using it (or at least not thinking about it very often!)

The people that need to understand and work with the Common Impact Data Standard thoroughly are the **database builders** and **software developers**. They ensure that the data standard is embedded into the software and database structures while they are being built and updated. The organizations using them will know that, in the background, their data is being organized and represented according to the data standard, but otherwise they do not need to think about it.

The Common Impact Data Standard is already the leading data standard globally!



Visit commonapproach.org to see the software providers already aligned with the Common Impact Data Standard.



Why use this data standard?

Organizations that adopt the Common Impact Data Standard are aligning with best practices and positioning themselves for future growth, knowledge and data sharing, and learning.

Data interoperability

When we talk about the importance of data standards, the concept of “data interoperability” often comes up. When data is interoperable, it means it can be shared in real time between different systems.

The advantage of having data that is organized and represented using an ontology is that it can be more easily shared. When the structure of the data is consistent and objects are named in consistent ways, it becomes possible to have a common exchange language. This allows impact data shared from one software to be interpreted by another software. Think almost fully automated impact reporting!

It also makes it possible to tag text online, meaning search engines can be used to navigate it—the potential opportunities here are still being explored.

While Common Approach is still new, only organizations that are in networks that are all using our data standard will benefit from the data interoperability it enables. It’s like the invention of the telephone, which made communication across distances simpler and easier. However, simple and easy communication is only valuable to you if the people that you want to talk to also have a telephone. Being able to simply and easily share impact data will be valuable when organizations have a network of other organizations they want to share data with.



Gilbert H. Grosvenor Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress., Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Linked Data

The Common Impact Data Standard is represented using linked data. Just as the Web links pages across the world, linked data enables the linking of data across the world. Given a set of terms in a vocabulary or ontology, linked data standards can assign a unique identifier to each term. When two or more SPOs use that unique



identifier, the software knows that they are referring to the same term, thereby reducing the ambiguity of what term is being referred to.

Using the Common Impact Data Standard can lead to:

1. **Sophisticated analysis.** The Common Impact Data Standard makes it possible for organizations to integrate their data, creating many new opportunities for analysis (e.g., longitudinal and transversal studies) using a variety of methods. This has the potential to lead to a better understanding of needs and a better understanding of what works.
2. **More autonomy.** Donors, investors, and government agencies are increasingly aware that old impact reporting techniques have been a burden to grantees and investors. The Common Impact Data Standard provides funders with the standard formats they need to understand portfolio-level impacts while leaving SPOs the autonomy to measure impact in ways that best fit their own data needs.
3. **Less paperwork.** The Common Impact Data Standard allows impact data to be represented in ways that can accommodate the reporting needs of diverse funders. Organizations using the Common Impact Data Standard will need to do less custom reporting.
4. **Greater visibility.** The Common Impact Data Standard can enable the tagging of an organization's content on the internet, making it easier for search engine users to find impact content on the web.
5. **More versatility.** The Common Impact Data Standard makes it easier for organizations to connect their impact measurement with other measurement standards, such as the UN SDG Global Indicator Framework, IRIS+, the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) Standard and others.
6. **Better impact.** Each organization makes some difference, but their most impactful stories are when the data can be connected and aggregated. The Common Impact Data Standard allows networks to pool data, see the impact, and use the data to improve impact.

The bottom line

At Common Approach, we believe that impact measurement can be improved by making it more relevant to social purpose organizations. For measurement to be made more relevant to these organizations, the tension between flexibility and uniformity must be addressed.

The Common Impact Data Standard, however, can be useful to any organization (not



just those focused on social purpose).

The Common Impact Data Standard offers a uniform **representation** of an indicator and impact model, but not uniform indicators or impact models. This is important because it gives each organization the flexibility to specify what they want to measure and how they want to measure it.

The Common Impact Data Standard offers uniformity at a very base level but allows each organization to customize the indicators and outcomes and methods to suit their individual purpose and linking or turn to a framework like IRIS+ or SDGs to help identify indicators for chosen outcome areas.

If you are an organization interested in the Common Impact Data Standard, the easiest way to use the Common Impact Data Standard is by choosing a software that is aligned:

- If you are already using impact management software, ask your software provider to contact Common Approach and **start the process to align** with the data standard. Our standards are all free to use, and we also provide free support to help more softwares like yours get aligned.
- If you do not yet have impact management software, consider using one that is **already aligned**.
- If you do not want to use software, **contact us** to discuss how a database can be structured to align with the Common Impact Data Standard.

Join the Common Approach community, stay up to date on our efforts to make impact measurement better, and help shape impact measurement standards:



Subscribe to the Common Approach newsletter



Follow us on LinkedIn



Follow us on Twitter



Visit the Common Approach website

