



## THE COMMON FORM **An Introduction**

**The Common Form makes it possible to contextualize the data collected for impact measurement. It helps answer the question “who created this impact?”**

### **What is the Common Form?**

The Common Form is a standardized way to represent the organizational information of a social purpose organization (SPO).

The organizational information it can contain includes both financial measures and descriptive measures. The financial measures include financial statements and key financial indicators, such as current assets, total assets, total liabilities, total revenues and total expenses. The descriptive measures include (but are not limited to) charity/business number, legal form, mission statement, team and board bios. In addition to basic organizational information, the Common Form also provides space to record data on the programs and projects within the organization.

Essentially, the Common Form is a way to represent your organization in an easy-to-share profile. These organizational profiles are incorporated into software platforms and websites that have aligned with the Common Approach, which allows the information to be presented in a standard, accessible and interoperable format.

Using the example of an official identification card, the Common Form is like an ID card for your organization. It contains identifying information about your organization, from founding to present-day operations, in a standardized format. Presenting your ID card to a reader (such as a funder, network, or another stakeholder) that understands the standardized format (because they also used software aligned with the Common Form) means you can share all the necessary identifying information in one quick step without the need to re-enter it each time.



For a section-by-section breakdown of the fields collected by the Common Form, please check out our [Field Guide](#).



## Purposes and uses

The Common Form facilitates the review, analysis and aggregation of data by organizing SPO information in a standard way that softwares can interpret.

The Common Form was created to contextualize the impact data collected using the [Common Impact Data Standard](#). By adding more context about the organization behind the data, assessors are able to “compare fair” so that factors such as geography, size, age, legal form, mission and program design can be considered when comparing impact data. This is an essential complement to the Common Impact Data Standard.

Given that the data represented by the Common Form also includes much of the information typically requested from organizations seeking grants, loans and investments, the application of the Common Form in streamlining the process of funding applications is also being tested. Common Approach’s goal is that this will reduce the time and resources needed to complete applications for funding or investment, both for the applicants and those assessing the applications.

## Who should use the Common Form?

The short answer to “who is the Common Form for” is “everyone.” Sort of. The Common Form is designed to benefit all organizations that need to share their organizational and/or impact data.

## How to use the Common Form

We say the Common Form 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 ontology of the Common Form in order to use it and benefit from it. To use or “adopt” the Common Form, they need to choose impact measurement software and websites that have aligned with the Common Form.

Social purpose organizations will fill out the Common Form and update its fields using their impact management software or by filling out and exporting their Common Form from hosting partner websites. Users can determine which fields make sense for them to complete.



Funders will receive the organizational information provided by the Common Form by using grant and fund management softwares that have aligned with the Common Form, in order to receive and interpret them.

**For more details about how Funders can align with the Common Form, check out our [Funder and Investor roadmap](#).**



We are working with software developers to embed the Common Form into their softwares 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 standard. Once they are set up using an aligned software, they do not need to think too much about it.

**For more details about how softwares can align with the Common Form, check out our [alignment resources](#).**



## Why use the Common Form?

Organizations that adopt the Common Form are aligning with best practices and positioning themselves for future growth, knowledge and data sharing, and learning. The Common Form fits into existing processes while reducing data entry burdens on social purpose organizations.

### Compatibility with existing processes

As a guiding principle, the form covers fields for descriptive measures that are used in most exchanges most of the time while allowing for exceptions without defining those exceptions.

In other words, users can determine which fields make the most sense for them to complete. Additional fields specific to a single exchange can be added to the Common Form for that exchange. The goal is to leverage data and tools that already exist—not to replace existing tools but to connect and enhance them.

### Interoperable and extensible

Much like the Common Impact Data Standard, the Common Form enables the data collected to be interoperable, meaning it can be shared in real-time with 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 the organizational data shared from one software to be interpreted by another software.

This way, Common Approach users do not have to rely on any specific proprietary software. They have the autonomy to choose software solutions that suit their needs with the confidence that their data will be easily shared with other aligned platforms in their network. The functionality of the Common Form can be expanded as new needs arise.

## Community-driven

Like all Common Approach standards, the Common Form is a co-created effort rooted in our **collaborative governance model** that centers the voices of the social purpose organizations who use the standard. All users of the Common Form will have a voice in shaping its structure and content moving forward. For more information about our community-driven mandate, read [here](#).

## Using the Common Form can lead to:

1. **More autonomy.** Donors, investors, and government agencies are increasingly aware that old funding application techniques have been a burden to grantees and investees. The Common Form provides funders with the standard formats they need to understand the organizations they are assessing, while leaving SPOs the autonomy to store, manage and share their data in ways that best fit their own needs.
2. **Less paperwork.** The Common Form allows organization data to be represented in ways that can accommodate the reporting needs of diverse funders. Organizations using the Common Form will need to do less data entry across multiple funders' systems.
3. **Greater visibility.** The Common Form can enable the tagging of an organization's content on the internet, making it easier for search engine users to find organizational profiles on the web.
4. **Better impact analysis.** The Common Form is an essential complement to the flexibility and interoperability of data enabled by the Common Impact Data Standard.



## Our vision of the long-term benefits of the Common Form

*For social purpose organizations:*

### **Easier applications for funding.**

A look into the Field Guide will reveal that all of the information collected by the Common Form can be found in applications for funding. The data interoperability enabled by the Common Form means that SPOs will be able to share their organizational data in applications for funding directly from their impact measurement software!

*For funders and investors:*

### **Streamlined assessment of social purpose organizations.**

Grant makers and investors want to see evidence of organizational effectiveness, track record and financial stability. The Common Form helps to assess the efficiency and financial sustainability of SPOs. Funders that align with the Common Form will help ease the burden of applications for funding by allowing organizations to share their data from platform to platform, while also allowing for easier assessment of that data by their own fund management platforms.

*For software developers:*

### **Easier benchmarking or analysis.**

Embedding the Common Form into software platforms—i.e. organizing this data in a standardized way—will enable developers to deliver quality data interpretation, comparison and analysis.

### **Easier data integration with other systems/databases (e.g. grant management)**

Once grant management softwares also align, aligned impact management softwares will be able to facilitate client data sharing, applications and reporting directly from their platforms.

## How the Common Form was Developed

The data fields collected by the Common Form were developed with extensive stakeholder engagement that included social purpose organizations, grantmakers and impact investors. They are based on existing and common organizational profiles—and in the case of the financial measures, drawn from scholarly and practitioner literature.



The development of the Common Form has been a phased and iterative process!

For more details, read **How the Common Form Was Developed.**



Now that the Common Form is a form with its own ontology and is ready for testing and implementation, we are working with current and new software partners to get it integrated into software and ready for use. Once we have completed the integration and testing, we will officially launch the Common Form as a standard ready for use.

Upon its launch, we will then recruit the first Common Form Technical Committee to lead the community-driven governance of the standard. This technical committee will be composed of representatives SPOs, funders, investors and others who will make sure that the Common Form fields stay relevant to the needs of our community.

## Bottom Line

If you are an organization that is interested in using the Common Form, the easiest way to do so is by choosing a software or website that is aligned. Stay tuned for updates as we get software options developed for your use!

- If you are already using impact measurement or grant/fund management software, ask your software provider to contact Common Approach and start the process to align with the standard. Our standards are all free to use, and we also provide free support to help more softwares like yours get aligned.
- If you are not yet ready for impact management software, stay tuned as we work to collaborate with Hosting Partners in the field who could provide easier access to this 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**

