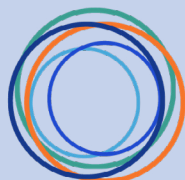




The Pathfinder Pilot

Validating the benefits of
the Common Approach standards,
and gaining new insights along the way



**COMMON
APPROACH**
TO IMPACT MEASUREMENT

At a glance

The Pathfinder Pilot was a three-year test of the Common Approach standards with networks of social purpose organizations across Canada. It began in 2022 with one network and grew to three. By the time our work was completed in 2026, 19 social purpose organizations had met the Common Foundations, shared data using the Common Impact Data Standard, and aggregated network impacts using the Common Framework. The Pilot was designed to deepen understanding, build community, and inform

the development of the standards. By those measures, it succeeded—and in succeeding, it surfaced challenges the field has not yet solved, including some the Common Approach team did not anticipate at the outset. This report tells the story of what we set out to do, what we learned, and what comes next. It is written for our funders and for anyone working to make impact measurement more useful to social purpose organizations and those they serve.

By the numbers

83

Social purpose organizations across 7 networks applied

33

Social purpose organizations selected across 3 networks

19

Organizations successfully using Common Approach standards by the end of the Pilot

1027

Unique, diverse, bottom-up indicators reported on across networks

7

Common Frameworks built to aggregate the diverse indicators into portfolio-level insights

Highlights

- **Thirty-three (33) social purpose organizations (SPOs)** worked together across three networks to gain a deeper understanding of impact measurement and adopt Common Approach standards to improve impact measurement within their organizations.
- **58% of these organizations** were successfully using Common Approach standards by the end of the Pilot, meaning they had met the Common Foundations, shared data using the Common Impact Data Standard and aggregated network impact data using the Common Framework.
- **Three (3) new data utilities were created to make data sharing easier.** Common Approach developed an Airtable extension, an Excel Add-in, and an Impact Data Converter, which bridge the technical gaps between how organizations currently store their data and the Common Impact Data Standard.
- **Eight (8) organizations** built and launched dashboards powered by the Common Impact Data Standard to communicate their impact with a wider public audience, beyond their funders.
- **Seven (7) Common Frameworks** were built across the three networks. Each Framework offers a transparent, replicable way to draw portfolio-level insights from 1027 diverse, bottom-up indicators without prescribing what the reporting organizations should measure.
- **Two (2) critical challenges were surfaced.** The Pilot identified the ETL Challenge as a central pain point that makes impact measurement burdensome (see Learning 1), and noted how insufficient tooling for qualitative data results in some of the best data being underutilized.
- **Nineteen (19) engaged users** became part of the Common Approach community, all of whom want to participate in future pilots, and testified to having seen enough value in Common Approach standards to continue using and maintaining them in their own organizations after the Pilot.



Key research outcomes

- **What SPOs call a “reporting burden” is mostly an “ETL” burden**, which is the work between data collection and use.
- **Making impact measurement relevant to SPOs is a greater challenge than expected.** Social purpose organizations cater to perceived external expectations even when none are imposed.
- **Software adoption is trickier than we thought.** SPOs need tools that work with what they already use.
- **The Common Impact Data Standard saves time spent on reporting**, but only when an organization can report the same impact data to at least two funders
- **The usability of qualitative data is the most consistent unmet need in impact measurement.** Participants want their stories to count as evidence, not just illustration.
- **Using the Common Framework to aggregate internal program data may be as valuable as its external use for portfolio-level aggregation by funders**, offering multi-program organizations a way to see the impact of their work as a whole.

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What we set out to do

Common Approach to Impact Measurement is working towards an impact measurement ecosystem that centres the needs of social purpose organizations (SPOs) while still giving funders and investors the data they need. The vision rests on four community-driven standards: the [Common Foundations](#), the [Common Impact Data Standard](#), the [Common Form](#)¹, and the [Common Framework](#). Together, they aim to make impact measurement more useful, more efficient, and more focused on the people whose lives are most affected by the work of SPOs.

The Pathfinder Pilot was designed to test these standards in practice. The Pilot had three objectives:

- **Generate evidence** about the changes and benefits that come from implementing the standards.
- **Build a community** of engaged organizations and networks committed to refining the standards over time.
- **Inform refinement** of the standards and the resources that support them.

Seven networks, comprising 83 organizations, responded to our call for participants in the Pathfinder Pilot. Three networks were selected to take part: the [Network for Optimizing Food Impact](#) (anchored by 10C Shared Space in Guelph-Wellington), the [Newfoundland and Labrador Social Enterprise and Innovation Coalition](#) (anchored by the Centre for Social Enterprise at Memorial University), and the [Community Lending Network](#) (anchored by Alterna Savings). These networks comprised 33 organizations in total. Pilot participants ranged from a one-person community garden program serving 22 language communities to a credit union division with a deep history of evaluation.

Each participating organization received a stipend for staff time, fully or partially subsidized access to impact measurement software, and access to technical and coaching support. Network anchors received resources to coordinate work across their network. Common Approach staff provided ongoing support and led the Pilot's evaluation.

The Common Approach Standards



COMMON FOUNDATIONS

A minimum standard for the “how” of impact measurement. Five essential practices for useful, non-burdensome measurement.



COMMON IMPACT DATA STANDARD

An ontology for organizing and sharing impact data that simplifies the exchange and aggregation of data across SPOs and funders, regardless of the impact models being used.



COMMON FRAMEWORK

A process for aggregating non-uniform metrics into coherence and insight in a way that is replicable, verifiable and transparent.



COMMON FORM

An ontology for organization and sharing non-impact data. It helps SPOs to cut down on retyping the same information over and over again for various different forms and reports.

¹ The [Common Form](#) was not tested in this Pilot because participants were not applying for new funding to multiple funders, which is where the Common Form delivers value portfolio-level value.

Evidence about the changes and benefits that come from implementing the standards

The Pathfinder Pilot set out to test whether the Common Approach standards work in practice. We found that, in general, they do. Overall, organizations deepened their understanding of impact measurement, generated and shared data, built dashboards, aggregated impact across diverse programs, and refined their measurement practices.

Figure 1 shows the impact of the Pathfinder Pilot on participants. It shows that most of the SPOs found that their measurements were useful for their own purposes (as opposed to bureaucratic paperwork undertaken for funders); that their measurement is well aligned with their strategy; that impact measurement systems improved; and that the data collection efforts are mostly well aligned with the needs of the organization and those they serve.

Impact of the Pathfinder Pilot

Outcomes experienced

Indicators selected are useful for our own measurement, management, and storytelling purposes.

Data collection is driven by the experiences, needs, and influences of the community we serve, as well as those most directly impacted by our work.

Have a Theory of Change and measurement framework (including outcomes, indicators, and data) that connect to our current and functional organizational strategy or strategic plan.

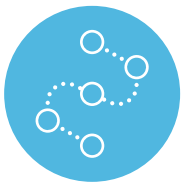
Impact measurement practices and systems have improved over the course of the Pathfinder Pilot project.

Established a consistent routine (including frequency, tools, and roles) for collection, analyzing, and using your impact data.

Participant Experience



Figure 1



SPOs found that the **Common Foundations** improved their impact measurement practices

The Pathfinder Pilot set to explore is the degree to which the Common Foundations, Common Approach's minimum standard for impact measurement practice, was indeed non-burdensome for social purpose organizations. This question was explored in a research paper published in a peer-reviewed journal, which Common Approach [summarized in this blog post](#). We surveyed participants at the end of the pilot. Figure 2 shows the Pathfinder Pilot participants' assessment of the ease of adopting the Common Foundations. Seventeen of the twenty-one survey respondents found the Common Foundations not overly burdensome; 10 strongly agreed and 7 slightly agreed. We found that the Common Foundations were helpful to both organizations with nascent impact measurement practices² and those with established impact measurement practices. Organizations with established practices used the Pilot to confirm and refine; organizations with nascent practices used it to build.

The chart below summarizes the value and ease of adopting the Common Foundations:

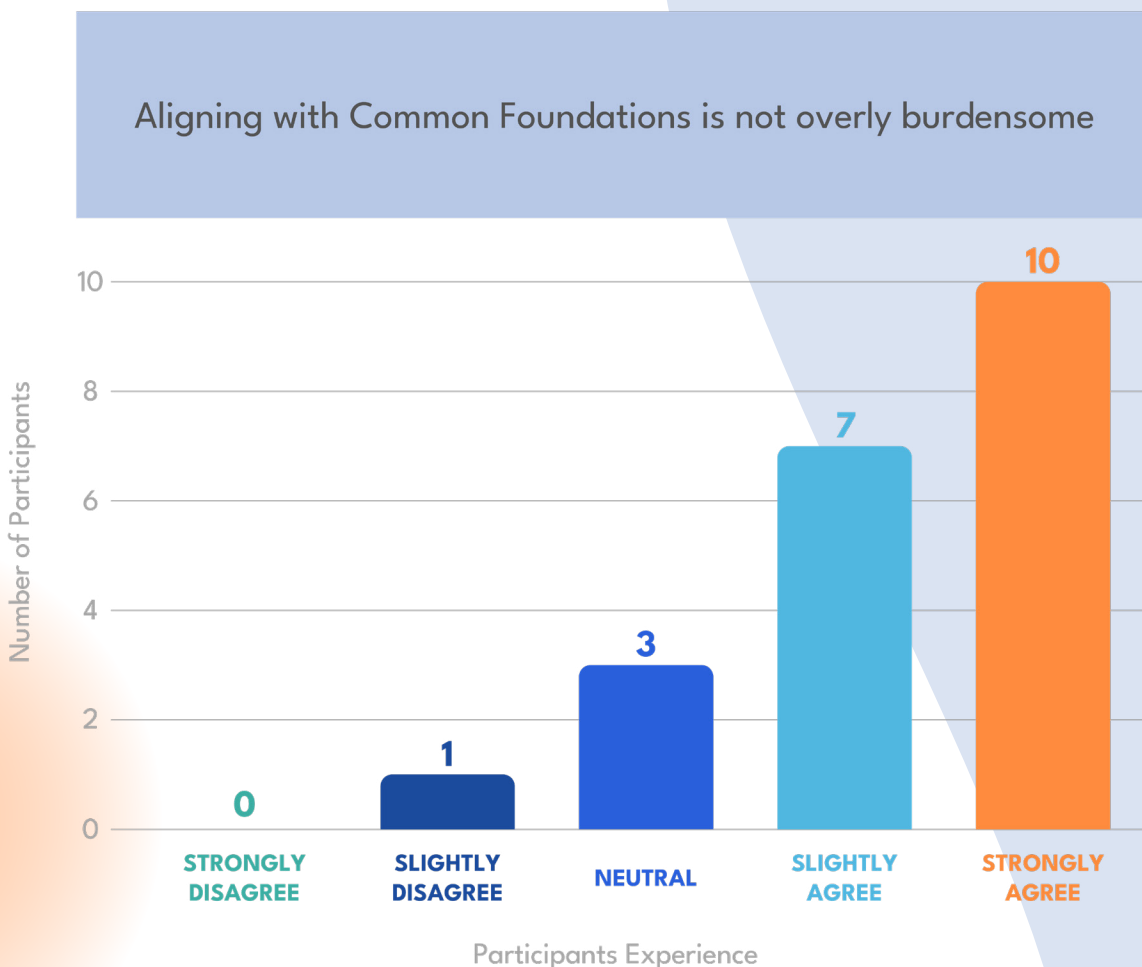


Figure 2

² For more on "nascent" and established, or "locked-in," impact measurement practices, and what they mean for the investor-investee relationship, read Common Approach's summary of Jarrod Ormiston's research, "[Why social enterprises resist or collectively improve impact assessment](#)."



SPOs prefer using the **Common Impact Data Standard** in low-cost tools they already have

A significant focus of the first year of the Pathfinder Pilot was supporting participants in switching to impact measurement software aligned with the Common Impact Data Standard, which is designed to make exchanging data fast and easy by reducing form-filling. As described in Learning 3, we found that software adoption was trickier than expected. Instead, SPOs adopted the Common Impact Data Standard most readily when it could be inserted into how they already work and store data, rather than by subscribing to new platforms. To accommodate this, Common Approach built three data utilities

(the Airtable extension, Excel Add-in, and Impact Data Converter) during the Pilot, in direct response to what we learned about how SPOs actually work with data.

Together, these data utilities offer an entry point to the Data Standard that does not require organizations to adopt new software. They are bridges between what SPOs already have and what the Data Standard requires. Most of the pilot organizations now use one of these utilities. Adoption is cheap, the learning curve is short, and the organizations can keep using the tools they are already familiar with.

Common Approach built three data utilities in response to learnings from the Pathfinder Pilot:

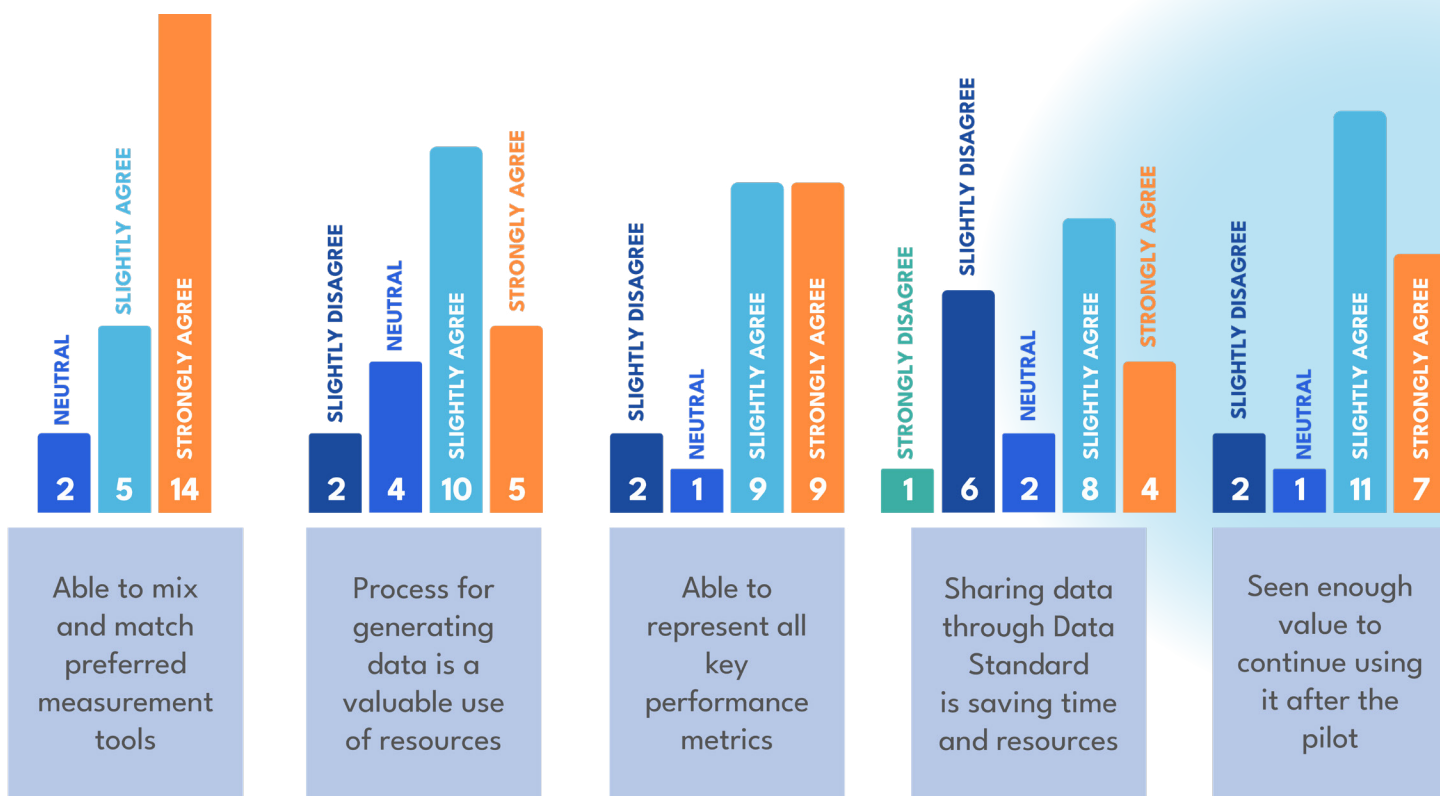
- **An Airtable Extension**: When added to an Airtable base, it allows for impact data capsules (also known as JSON-LD files) to be opened, viewed, edited, and exported.
- **An Excel Add-in**: When added to an Excel Workbook, it allows for impact data capsules (also known as JSON-LD files) to be opened, viewed, edited, and exported.
- **The Impact Data Converter**: An online tool that converts properly configured files (Excel, CSV, JSON, API endpoint) into an impact data capsule, or impact data capsules into other file formats. This tool is being further tested by participants in the Social Finance Fund and will be made more widely available later this year.

The **Common Impact Data Standard** reduced reporting burden and transformed how organizations leverage their data

The Common Impact Data Standard was created to ease the sharing of impact data. The Pilot confirmed this benefit. Once an organization has adopted the Common Impact Data Standard—typically by using a data utility—generating an impact data

capsule takes about a minute. Across the three networks, 1027 metrics were shared in this format. Figure 3 below shows the Pathfinder Pilot participants' assessment of the ease of adopting the data standard.





Stages of Adoption

Figure 3

By far the biggest success of the Pathfinder Pilot was the dashboards built from impact data capsules. We partnered with Purpose Analytics to automate data flows from various spreadsheets and CRMs into a data capsule, which we then used to populate a dashboard. Eight participants requested and received these dashboards. The dashboards allow these SPOs to communicate their impact on their own terms, while ensuring their data remains flexible, transferable to other systems and shareable with their funder(s) and network. These dashboards arose out of one of the Pathfinder Pilot’s most significant research outcomes: What SPOs call a “reporting burden” is mostly an ETL burden (see Learning 1).

These dashboards improved communication with community audiences beyond funders. Executive teams can now review impact data routinely, and board reporting has become more efficient. The reduction in reporting burden did more than just save time—it expanded what organizations could achieve with their own data, influencing how and why they share their data, and with whom.



What is an impact data capsule?

The Common Impact Data Standard allows users to create an impact data capsule containing all their impact data. An impact data capsule can be shared from platform to platform with little human effort—exporting data to those who need it.



Networks used the **Common Framework** to aggregate diverse, bottom-up indicators without prescribing what anyone should measure

A core premise of the Common Approach is that organizations should collect and track only data that is highly relevant to them and their impact strategy. Grantmakers, investors, and other portfolio managers should be able to access the data they need for portfolio-level aggregations without imposing top-down metrics. This was tested for the first time in the Pathfinder Pilot and was a huge success.

Seven Common Frameworks were developed across the three networks, proving that we can draw portfolio-level insights from diverse, organization-defined indicators—across various sectors, methodologies, and theories of change—without forcing them into a standardized, one-size-fits-all metric set.

This demonstrates the core technical promise of the Common Framework: providing a transparent, replicable, and verifiable process for aggregation. Historically, portfolio-level impact aggregation presented a binary trade-

off: funders either prescribed common metrics (sacrificing contextual diversity) or accepted that aggregation across diverse portfolios was impossible (sacrificing the ability to see the “big picture”). The Common Framework resolves this by using construct-based equivalence and bounded flexibility to aggregate without flattening context. The Pilot successfully demonstrated this approach across three independent networks.

Funders and intermediaries will be able to reference these pilot examples to aggregate data across heterogeneous portfolios. However, the Framework’s value extends beyond external portfolio management. The same logic that empowers networks to aggregate member data also enables individual social purpose organizations (SPOs) to aggregate across their own diverse programs—a critical internal application that many Pilot participants identified as a key takeaway. (See learning 5.)

Build a community of engaged organizations and networks committed to refining the standards over time

The Pathfinder Pilot set out to build a community of engaged SPOs and networks committed to refining the standards over the longer term, and it did. In a survey, 20 of 21 participants said they were interested in joining a future pilot. Eighteen participants saw enough value in the standards to continue using and maintaining them in their own organizations after the Pathfinder Pilot ended.

The depth of the commitment matters as much as the breadth. Twelve of the twenty-one respondents are willing to join Common Approach’s SPO Council—a sustained governance role with the Common Approach. Six are willing to serve on a technical committee. Four are willing to join a Common Approach task force. Three are willing to serve on the Common Approach Board of Directors.



The Pilot earned an average recommendation score of 8.8 out of 10, with zero detractors. One participant highlighted the value of the community, noting:

“ The project has helped build a really good network, a space for people to meet peers and talk about some of these [impact measurement] challenges.”

We built a community of engaged users that wants to keep going!

Key Research Outcomes

Perhaps the most significant objective of the Pathfinder Pilot was to inform the refinement of the standards and the resources that support them. The Pilot was designed to surface what we did not yet know. It did! Six learnings stand out; three that revised hypotheses we held going in, two that named challenges that need scholarship and tools the field does not yet have and one that validated the usefulness of the Common Framework to social purpose organizations.

.....**Learning 1** What SPOs call a “reporting burden” is mostly an ETL burden

For years, SPOs have told researchers that the impact measurement that they must undertake to report to their funders is a burdensome, low-value time sink. The Pathfinder Pilot refined our understanding of this challenge. We have come to believe that what was long understood as a “reporting burden” is, in fact, largely an ETL burden.

Most Pathfinder Pilot participants were collecting data (sometimes a great deal of it) across three to five digital tools. This might be a survey platform, a CRM, an e-commerce or registration system, and one or more spreadsheets. They were generally using the right tools for the job. Data collection was rarely the problem. Filling in forms for funders, once the data was ready, was rarely the problem. The burden lies **between those two steps**: in the work of pulling data from many sources into one place, cleaning and deduplicating it, formatting it, and producing the metric the funder wants or that the dashboard would display. Data scientists call this step “ETL,” which stands for “extract, transform, load”. The pattern shows up in organizations at every level of digital maturity.

A small membership organization tracking ‘number of attendees’ pulls data from Eventbrite, copies and pastes it into Excel, reformats columns to match an in-person event tracker, removes duplicates, runs a count formula, and types the result into a metrics spreadsheet.

- Two hours per quarter, per metric.
- For an organization tracking 15 metrics, that is roughly two weeks per year of staff time on transformation work alone.

A large multi-program agency tracking ‘evictions prevented’ runs reports from two separate databases, transforms the data to match date formats, joins on individual identifiers, checks for inconsistencies, and applies multi-step calculations.

- Eight hours per quarter, per metric.
- Across a dozen metrics, that is months of skilled staff time annually.

We learned that this burden does not get smaller as the organization gets more sophisticated. It simply changes shape. Responses to Common Foundations self-assessments from both Pathfinder participants and SPOs outside of the pilot confirmed the prevalence of this challenge.

ETL hurdles are limiting impact measurement. The Common Foundations self-assessment gauges five essential practices in sequence. The Common Foundations self-assessments showed strong scores for planning, indicator selection, and data collection, but weaker scores for the practices that depend on transformation: gauging performance and using data for decisions. The drop-off happens exactly where the ETL work lies.



Reclassifying the reporting burden as a technical hurdle in ETL revealed that it is a challenge that can be readily addressed. As evidence of this: Common Approach was able to build its data utilities to address a portion of the ETL process (specifically, the data transformation needed between SPO data sources and the Common Impact Data Standard's format) fairly quickly and with moderate resources. Dashboard tools like Tableau address the loading and visualization end.

Tools to make ETL less burdensome exist, and many of them are free or low-cost.

Calling the problem by a specific, informative name helps social purpose organizations find solutions that are already available, and helps funders understand that what they have been hearing as “reporting burden” is partly a request for sector-level investment in the transformation layer between collection and use.

While the ETL challenge highlights the operational and technical hurdles that SPOs face, it does not address the full scope of factors that may make impact measurement burdensome. Measurement becomes

particularly taxing when it focuses on funder-mandated indicators that offer little value for an organization's own decision-making, management, or storytelling. We define this as the "relevance challenge," Learning 2 of this report. The two often appear together: SPOs do heavy ETL work to produce metrics they did not choose, which may not align with the organization's own data needs. The ETL framing addresses the burden of the transformation work. The relevance framing addresses what the work is in service of. Both need attention.

Learning 2 Making impact measurement relevant to SPOs is a greater challenge than expected

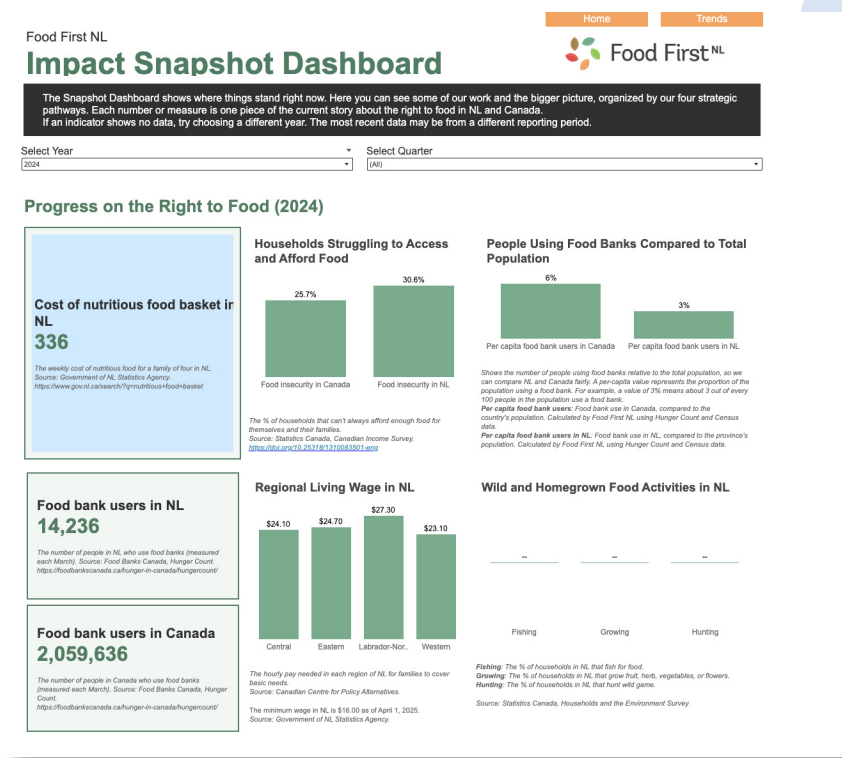
The "relevance challenge" is the observation that SPOs struggle to make their impact measurement relevant to their own needs. Even when the tools exist and are within reach, and funder pressure is reduced, SPOs still tend to orient their impact measurement toward what they think external audiences expect rather than toward what they themselves find useful. The challenge here is how to shift SPOs to think about how impact measurement can be relevant to their organizations, and to collect data they can use both in their own decision-making and in their reporting to funders.

Research has found that measurement is most useful when it is relevant to the organization doing the measuring. Organizations with measures they use themselves are more likely to learn, innovate, and be data-driven than those that choose metrics solely to report to funders. But too often, it does not occur to an organization to measure what they themselves want to know about their impact, let alone that their funders might be willing or even enthusiastic to accept this information if they did.

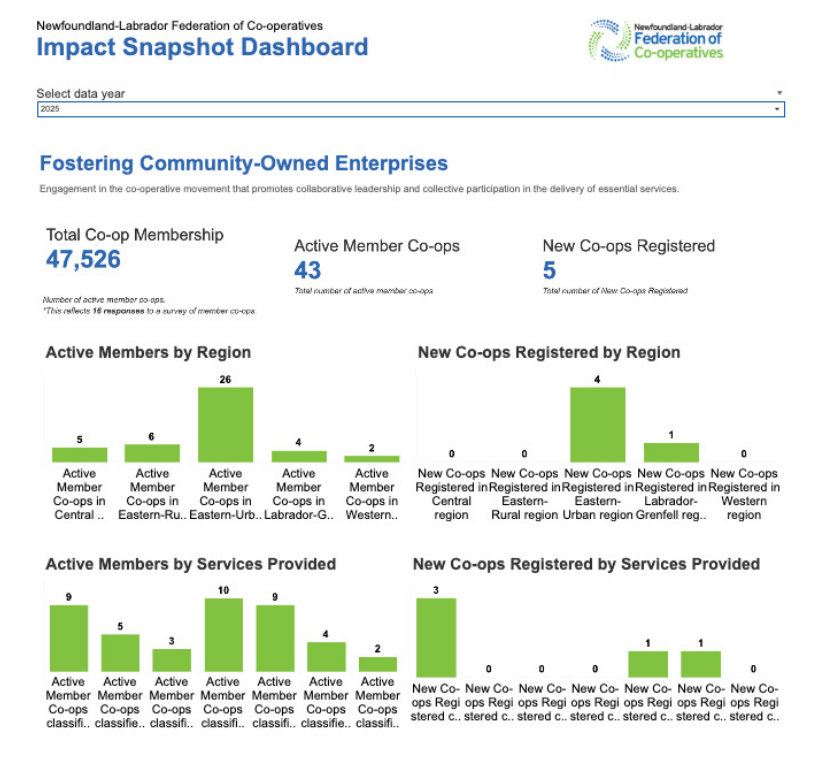
The Pilot suggests that creating dashboards of impact data may be one mechanism through which SPOs can clearly see how they might use the results of their impact measurement for their own purposes (planning, decision-making, communications with community) in addition to reporting to funders. We will continue testing this hypothesis. But the Pilot has already surfaced two observations worth sharing. The first is about what dashboard creation does for an organization. Building a dashboard of the impact data they've collected requires an SPO to make a series of relevance decisions in sequence: which audiences the dashboard will speak to, what those audiences need to see, what story the SPO wants to tell about its own work, and which metrics carry that story. Several Pathfinder participants described thinking through multiple audiences (boards, staff, the community, funders, peer

organizations in their sector) as they prioritized what to display. Those decisions are not technical. They are decisions about how the organization wants to be seen, made by the organization on its own terms. The act of building the dashboard becomes a structured exercise in measurement relevance. Second, and more importantly, with a dashboard powered by the Common Impact Data Standard, the underlying data remains in a portable, Data Standard-aligned format. The same data capsule that feeds the dashboard can also be sent to a funder, used for aggregation across a network, or imported into another tool, without being trapped inside the dashboard's proprietary structure. The dashboard becomes a visible artifact for the organization's own audiences while the data stays usable for everything else.

Two examples from the Pathfinder participants show what this looks like in practice. [Food First NL's dashboard](#) and [Fair Finance Fund's dashboard](#) were both built during the Pilot using data aligned with the Common Impact Data Standard. They speak to different audiences in different ways, but both organizations describe the dashboard as helping them clarify what they wanted their measurement to convey.



Food First NL's dashboard



NLFC's dashboard

Learning 3 Software adoption is trickier than we thought

We began the Pathfinder Pilot believing that the easiest path to using the Common Approach standards ran through impact measurement software. We hypothesized that once a social purpose organization had met the Common Foundations and selected an aligned software platform, the rest would follow. The SPO would set up its impact data in their chosen software, be able to consistently generate an impact data capsule on demand, and be able to share that data file with its funder or for network-level aggregation. Instead, we found that software selection took longer than expected; most platforms did not fit the context of small- and mid-sized SPOs, and the work of getting data into the platform proved to be the hardest part of the journey.

The majority of third-party impact measurement software platforms are designed for larger organizations that can afford the subscriptions and already have dedicated impact staff and established impact measurement practices. For most of the SPOs in our pilot—small to mid-sized, often with one or two staff carrying impact measurement alongside other work—these tools were heavier than their contexts could sustain. The available software platforms lacked features to support the ETL work needed upstream of data analysis (data cleaning, transformation, and movement from collection forms). Several organizations invested significant time in platforms that did not fit, only to revert to the spreadsheets and Airtable bases they had been using all along. In response, we built data utility tools that meet SPOs where they already work.

The Airtable extension, Excel add-in and Impact Data Converter are not impact measurement software. They are bridges between the tools SPOs already use and the Common Impact Data Standard. The Pathfinder Pilot revealed how most SPOs actually work with data. Common Approach built our data utilities as a response to this. Most of the organizations that completed the Pathfinder Pilot now use one or more of these utilities.

Our hypothesis about software use was not entirely incorrect. Software was the right solution for some SPOs, just not the majority. Some Pathfinder Pilot participants used [b.world](#) and found it useful; The b.world team met with us regularly throughout the pilot, used what we were learning together to refine their platform, and built features in response to the SPOs in front of them. In general, participants who tried b.world had a positive experience. One participating organization has invested in continuing to use the software beyond the end of the Pathfinder Pilot.

For SPOs ready to invest in dedicated impact measurement software, aligned platforms like b.world offer a pathway that may grow in value as more software providers close the ETL gap.

Learning 4 Organizations only save time when they can share their impact data capsule with more than one funder

The Common Impact Data Standard was designed to reduce reporting burden. The mechanism is straightforward: the Data Standard provides a common structure for impact data, which enables an SPO to generate an impact data capsule containing their impact data. If two or more of its funders accept the data capsule, the SPO saves the time it would have spent producing a separate report for each funder. This is the Data Standard's central promise.

The Pathfinder Pilot set out to test this promise directly, but we were not able to do so. While we had identified that the participating organizations shared funders, the participating programs did not. (Many Pathfinder participants

only brought one of their organization's programs into the Pilot.) We had hoped to measure the time savings achieved by using a data capsule to report to two or more funders; however, there were no shared funders with which to test this. We have since tested this in our work with the Government of Canada's Social Finance Fund and found benefit to the SPO.

What the Pilot did establish is that the SPO side of the exchange works. Impact data capsules can be generated quickly and repeatedly. Dashboards can be built using them. As we achieve scale and more funders choose to accept Impact Data Capsules, SPOs will save more and more time.

Learning 5 The Common Framework's internal use may be as valuable as its external use

The Common Framework offers a transparent, replicable way for a funder or investor to organize diverse, bottom-up indicators from many SPOs into portfolio-level insights without prescribing what any SPO should measure.

During the pilot, Common Approach hosted workshops with each of the three networks where participants were shown network-level aggregation of their own data using the Framework's thematic structure. Upon seeing how their network could aggregate diverse data from its members, multiple participants recognized that it solved a problem they had been carrying within their own organizations. Multi-program SPOs—

organizations whose impact flows through several funded programs, each with its own indicators and reporting cycles—saw the Common Framework as a way to organize their programs across funders, cycles, and in language they recognized as their own.

The same thematic structure that allows funders to aggregate across grantees, networks to aggregate across members, and investors to aggregate across portfolio companies can help a multi-program charity aggregate across programs. Doing so will allow executives and board members to see the organization's overall performance results.

Learning 6 Qualitative data usability is the most consistent unmet need

Across Pathfinder Pilot participants, no single theme emerged more often than the desire to better use qualitative data. Organizations described their stories, testimonies, and field observations as their most valuable evidence of impact—and as their most underused. Several said the qualitative data was where they could actually see their impact, but they lacked the tools, methods, or confidence to present it as evidence.

“ We have a recognition that measurement and evaluation must include qualitative and contextual information in order to interpret well. ” — Participant reflection, end-of-Pilot interview

In their current form, the Common Framework and Common Impact Data Standard effectively accommodate quantitative metrics but face limitations with qualitative indicators, particularly regarding long-form narratives and extensive texts. **Dashboards built during the Pilot show numbers; the stories that give those numbers meaning often live elsewhere.** Several participants pointed this out.

Three qualitative need areas were identified during the pilot:

Storage and retrieval

Several SPOs collect qualitative data across disconnected sources (CRMs, exit interviews, video clips) but lack systems to retrieve it for analysis. Qualitative data exists, but it is disconnected from the measurement system.

Analysis and synthesis

Even when qualitative data are centrally collated and stored, SPOs often lack the tools and methodological knowledge to conduct thematic analysis.

Legitimacy

Despite qualitative data (especially testimonials and beneficiary feedback) being the most readily available data that many SPOs identified as their most useful data, several SPOs expressed uncertainty about whether this data is “good enough.” They were often unsure if qualitative data was robust enough to support the conclusions they wanted to draw.

While qualitative data has been important to Common Approach since the beginning, it became clear during the Pathfinder Pilot that using it with the Common Impact Data Standard was challenging. To begin addressing the challenge, we held a workshop on managing qualitative data with The Community Lending Network in 2025. Participants used composite narrative methods to identify shared themes across borrower stories, then mapped real cases to the themes and drew out archetype characteristics.

Future pilots may build on the work started with the workshop, explore other forms of qualitative data analysis and could include working alongside social purpose organizations to further develop right-sized methodologies.

A note on participant completion

Not all of the organizations that were part of the three networks selected to participate in the Pathfinder Pilot completed the program. Of the 33 participants who joined at the outset, 14 organizations left the program.

The reasons for their departures cluster into three patterns. The most common was capacity: small teams stretched thin, with impact measurement competing against immediate program work. These organizations left simply because their attention was needed elsewhere. The second is organizational transition: mergers, leadership changes, program wind-downs, and major strategic shifts. These organizations left because the measurement they had been doing in the Pathfinder pilot was no longer relevant. The third is an approach mismatch between what the organizations needed and what the Pathfinder Pilot could offer. Some organizations preferred qualitative and relational measurement that the Common Approach standards, as they then existed, could not yet accommodate. Some had operational rather than impact-focused data.

Some had ambitions that exceeded their current capacity to do the work the Pilot required.

The third pattern warrants further exploration. Several departures happened because the Pilot's original hypothesized pathway—select software, onboard data, work with the standards from there—did not fit the organization. The data utilities we built mid-Pilot are partly a response to those departures. They are designed to make the Common Approach standards accessible to organizations whose data lives in the tools they already use, without asking them to adopt new software. We expect this to make any future iteration of this work better suited to a wider range of organizations than the Pilot's original design.

The organizations that completed the Pilot have demonstrated what the Common Approach standards can achieve. The organizations that left provided evidence of what the surrounding support needs to look like. Both are worthwhile findings.

What's next

The Pathfinder Pilot was the first sustained test of the Common Approach standards. It is not the last. We hope future tests and pilot projects will respond directly to the learnings surfaced by the Pathfinder Pilot.

We have our sights set on these explorations:

1 Test the Common Framework's internal use by SPOs for aggregating impact data across multiple programs

We will collaborate with multi-program social purpose organizations (SPOs) to evaluate how effectively the Common Framework's thematic structure helps them organize impact data across both funded and unfunded programs.

2 Further test the time-saving benefits of SPOs reporting the same data to multiple funders using the Common Impact Data Standard

We have seen SPOs participating in the Government of Canada's Social Finance Fund experience the time-saving benefits of adopting the Data standard. As more and more SPOs and funders adopt the Common Impact Data Standard, we will be able to better assess which conditions improve the expected time savings. The aim is not only to test whether reporting to multiple funders produces the time savings the Data Standard is designed to deliver, but also to learn how SPOs adjust their impact measurement practices over time when funders and investors signal openness to flexible, SPO-defined indicators.

3 Exploring qualitative data

In line with our Guiding Principles, Common Approach is committed to evolving our standards to work as well with qualitative data as they do with quantitative data. Working alongside social purpose organizations, future pilots will explore methods, storage approaches, and pathways to integrate qualitative management into Data Standard-aligned data utilities and software. Approaches and tools will be tested with past pilot participants and qualitative evaluators and made openly available as they mature.



4 Continued development of our data utilities

The Airtable Extension, Excel Add-in, and Impact Data Converter will continue to evolve based on use. We are also exploring additional data utilities for other tools commonly used by SPOs, so that the entry point to the Common Approach standards remains reachable and organizations can continue to use the tools they already have.

An invitation

If you are:



A FUNDER

seeking to lower reporting burdens while making impact measurement more relevant for grantees



AN SPO

considering whether the Common Approach standards fit your work



A SOFTWARE DEVELOPER

interested in alignment



A PEER RESEARCHER

studying impact measurement

There may be a place for you in the next phase of this work!
We would love to have a conversation.
Please reach out to info@commonapproach.org.

Acknowledgements

The Pathfinder Pilot was made possible by the trust and commitment of the social purpose organizations (SPOs) that took part. We are grateful to every organization that applied, every organization that started, and every organization that stayed. The 33 organizations that started the journey with us, along with the three network anchors who coordinated and supported the work.

The 33 Participants

Afro-Caribbean Business Network (ACBN), Alterna Savings Credit Union — Community Impact Division, Be One to Give (B12Give), Business in the Streets (BITS), Centre for Social Enterprise at Memorial University (CSE MUN), DC Farms, End Homelessness St. John's (EHSJ), Fair Finance Fund, FanJoy Culinary + Wellness Centre, Food First NL (FFNL), Friendlier, Guelph Farmers Market (project of 10C Shared Space), Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Co-operatives (NLFC), Nourish Kitchen (project of 10C Shared Space), Ontario Co-operative Association, Ottawa Community Loan

Fund (OCLF), Open Food Network Canada (OFN), Choices For Youth, Federation of African Canadian Economics Coalition, Stella's Circle, Community Sector Council NL (CSCNL), Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition, Everdale, Fresh City Farms, Collegea, Circular Opportunity Innovation Launchpad (COIL), Toward Common Ground, HiGarden International Inc, OASIS Food Hub, St. James Town Community Enterprise Co-operative, Winterhill Farm & Garden and Shelldale Farm Park and The SEED (programs of Guelph Community Health Centre (Guelph CHC).

Network anchors

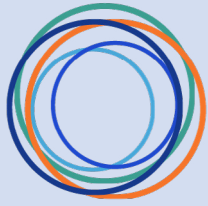
10C Shared Space (Network for Optimizing Food Impact). Centre for Social Enterprise at Memorial University (Newfoundland and Labrador Social Enterprise and Innovation Coalition). Community Impact Division of Alterna Savings Credit Union (Community Lenders Network).

With gratitude to

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**COMMON
APPROACH**
TO IMPACT MEASUREMENT

About Common Approach to Impact Measurement

Common Approach to Impact Measurement is developing standards for flexible, shareable impact measurement.

By developing community-driven standards, we aim to change impact measurement's underpinnings. Common Approach is committed to refocusing impact measurement on the needs of operating charities, nonprofits, social-purpose businesses, and those they serve while ensuring foundations, grantmakers and impact investors get the data they need.

Common Approach is four community-driven standards: Common Foundations, Common Impact Data Standard, Common Framework and Common Form.

To learn more, to adopt the standards, or to engage with the work described in this report, visit commonapproach.org.

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