

Where we want to go: Innovation landscape



Characteristics of a better future

Throughout our research and conversations, we consistently heard three essential principles that stakeholders both inside and outside the field believe are necessary to create a better future for monitoring, evaluation, and learning: (1) more effectively putting decision-making at the center; (2) better empowering constituents and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion; and (3) more productively learning at scale.

The three characteristics of a better future

More effectively putting decision-making at the center

The capacities, incentives and practices to create useful and meaningful evidence, integrate it effectively in decision-making, and subsequently change behavior continue to be elusive for most organizations.

More productively learning at scale

New opportunities abound to develop collective knowledge and integrated data efforts that promote learning at the scale of the problems we face. However, incentives for transparency seem insufficient, infrastructure development requires resources, and collective action problems remain difficult to untangle.

Better empowering constituents and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)

Despite widespread aspirations, many social sector organizations continue to struggle to develop incentives and integrate feedback processes to consistently engage constituents in ongoing, systematic, and measurable ways.

Understanding the characteristics of a better future

Putting decision-making at the center

Putting decision-making at the center is about the “why” of monitoring, evaluation, and learning. It involves both the generation of data-driven insight and its application at an important organizational moment to change behavior. If we focus on the questions we want to answer, their importance for essential decisions about how to allocate resources, make strategy adjustments are clear:

- What do we want to accomplish?
- Are we doing what we said we would do? (Should we be doing something else instead?)
- How are we doing and what can we do better?
- What impact are we having?

On the one hand this is obvious, and data for decision-making is an idea that’s widely embraced. However, it is difficult to achieve in practice. Too often the starting point for measurement is understanding reporting requirements and on what metrics and methods to use, rather than on deeper questions about what decision-makers need to know to make smarter choices about creating impact. As one expert told us, “Instead of evidence-based decision-making, we need decision-based evidence-making.” Strategy and decision-making require more agile and continuous feedback loops that link decisions with the right data, the development of persuasive analysis, and the integration of these insights into decision-making processes.

Better empowering constituents and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion

If putting decision-making at the center is about the “why,” then *better empowering constituents and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion* is about the “who.” It is about reframing who gets to define what is needed, what constitutes success, and what impact we are having. It is also about data as an asset, and who gets to benefit from and control that asset. If we view constituents as active participants rather than passive recipients in any intervention, their ability to provide input and obtain access to data is inherently vital and valuable.

This characteristic brings together two important strands that are interconnected but not identical: a focus on constituent voice and an emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion. We bring these two strands together in the context of monitoring, evaluation, and learning because they support and reinforce each other. Enabling constituents to define what matters and what works is an important path to inclusion and equity. Using an equity lens in the creation of data and knowledge opens up possibilities for engaging and empowering all constituents.

More productively learning at scale

More productively learning at scale encompasses the interrelated, but distinct ideas of knowledge-sharing and collaborative learning. Knowledge sharing depends on individual programs and organizations sharing what they are learning: the good and the bad. Knowledge-sharing allows the social sector to marshal its

resources effectively by avoiding duplication of effort in articulating social problems, developing potential solutions, and determining what works in what contexts. Through knowledge-sharing, organizations can build on what has come before them rather than recreating knowledge for individual use or replicating solutions and strategies that have previously been found insufficient.

Collaborative learning refers to cross-program or cross-organizational efforts to collectively create data and information that everyone can use. Collaborative learning is required for the social sector to develop field-level insights and support interventions at a larger scale. Complex, system-level problems require coordination and the development of a shared data infrastructure to promote broad hypothesis-testing and analysis.

Throughout our work, we have found that these key elements—which we refer to in this document as “the Three Characteristics”—serve as an important touchstone for understanding and organizing the types of changes that practitioners and experts in the nonprofit and philanthropic arena believe will lead to a more impactful future.

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