

Keynote: Meeting the present moment, evaluative enquiry and privileging the relational

Danish Evaluation Society | September 2026

About me

Dr. Leonora Buckland - Senior Research Fellow, Esade Center for Social Impact

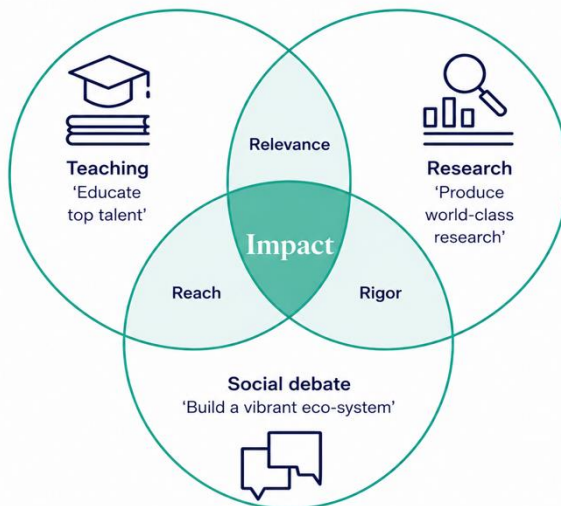
- Specialist in social entrepreneurship, impact investing, gender lens investing and impact management
- Co-authored various ECSI reports on impact management and am working on academic papers related to the content
- I curate the Esade-BBK Community of Practice on impact management
- I have worked with multiple organisations on their impact management across NGOs, philanthropies and impact investors
- I ran a venture philanthropy foundation supporting social entrepreneurs
- I have worked recently at EU policy level on IMM and the social economy
- I am a board member of Ship2B Foundation, Spain
- I am part of an embedded evaluation team in a three-year evaluation and learning partnership of Access, a blended finance wholesaler in the UK

About the Esade Center for Social Impact

We work towards a world in where people and organizations have the capacity to better understand and solve complex global challenges to regenerate the environment and reduce social inequality

Synergetic model

Esade Center for Social Impact



What do we do?

We develop research with rigor, reach, and relevance about and for social impact which we aim to use in our classrooms

In-depth research areas

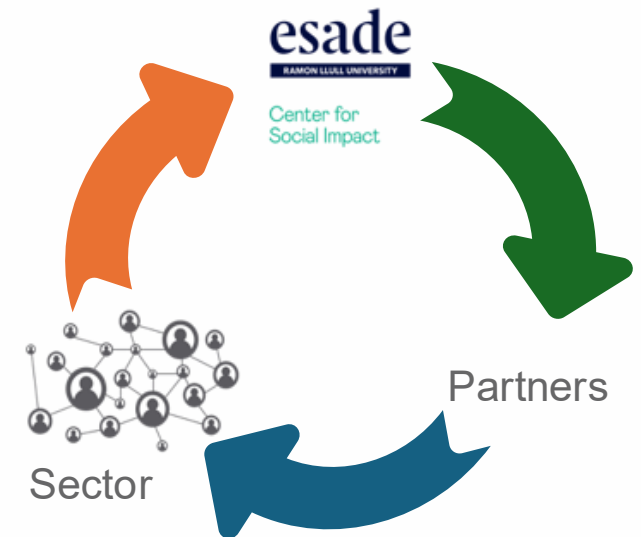
- Impact investing
- Impact entrepreneurship
- Social economy
- Impact measurement and management (IMM)
- Gender lens investing



We aim to push the frontiers of social impact practice through the interplay of academic and applied research

Our team has developed a research approach that contributes to:

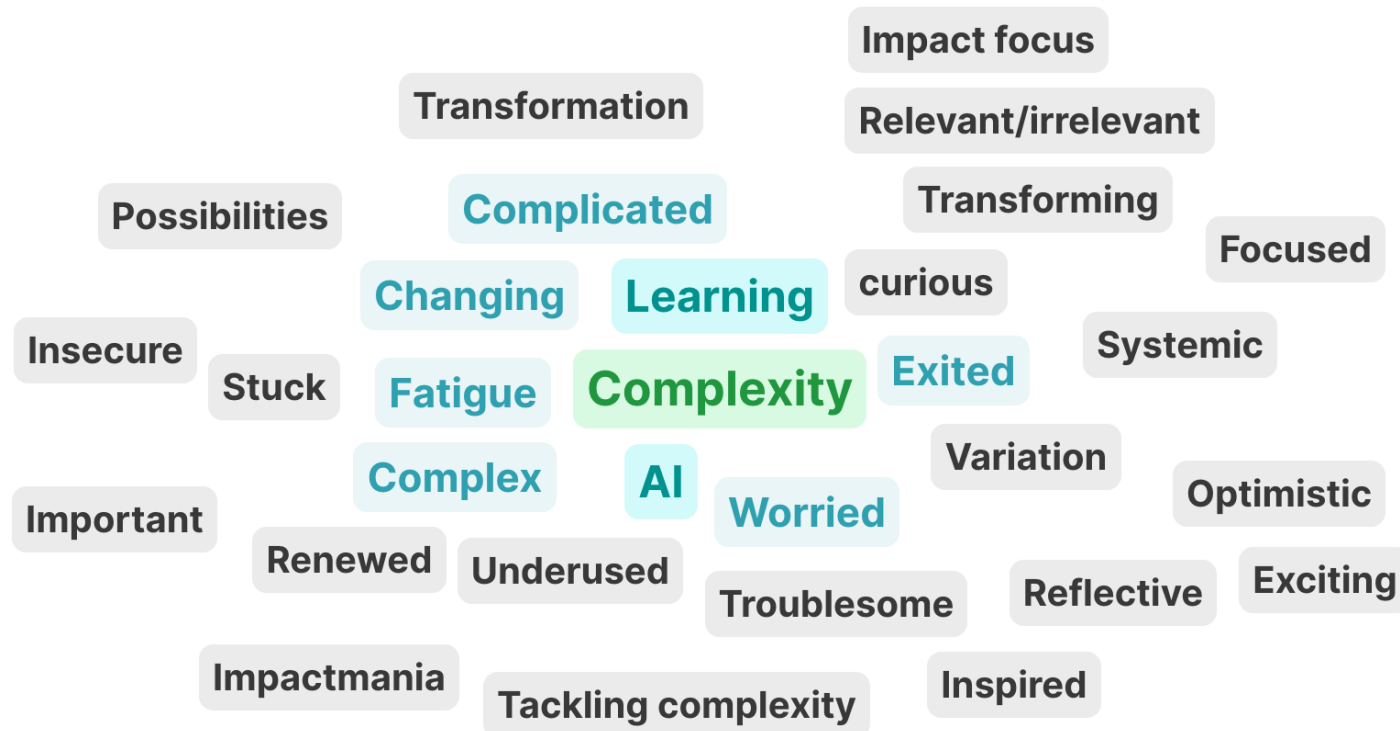
- Fostering rigor and transparency on social impact practice to promote real progress and avoid impact washing
- Transforming paradigms, legitimizing impact as an essential part of any business or funding model
- Equipping the next generation of leaders to rise to the challenge, with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to develop and lead collaborative, equitable and sustainable solutions



1

Broad picture – where is the field of evaluation going?

Slido: One word to describe how you feel about the future of evaluation as a field?



The current evaluation discourse – where is evaluation headed?

- AI brings opportunities and risks – how does the evaluator's role shift?
- From backward-looking to real-time and forward-looking evaluation
- Blindspots, biases and acknowledging and mitigating our own power
- Finding ways to give voice to those more marginalized and conducting equitable evaluation
- Focus on evaluation use and evidence-based decision-making
- No evaluation without the focus on the relationship between evaluation and learning i.e. MEL

S.O.S. Help!

*We need to become an
accredited profession*

*We need to better
understand the links
between evaluation
and decision-making*

We need more data

*We need more tools and
methods*

*We need more people (demand
and supply) to understand what
evaluation can and can't do*

*We need capacity-building of
evaluation users*

*We need more more data
scientists and AI specialists*

*We need more real-time
evaluation*

My contention:

***We need to do things differently –
more relationally, more equitably and
in a more embedded way to leverage
the opportunities the digital wave is bringing,
privileging individual and
collective learning as the means***

2

*ESADE contributions to the IMM
field of practice*

Key research reports and frameworks - whistlestop tour!

- **IMM Journey** – *as an organisation, how do we start to understand and manage our impact and what is our roadmap?*
- **Governance of impact** – *how do we align the 'powers that be' with the impact / evaluation teams?*
- **Strategy - IMM link** – *how can we make impact evidence count in decision-making? Navigating Turbulent Times in Philanthropy report*
- **Systems change** – *how is systems change practice reshaping MEL and our organisations? - to be published October 2026*



01 Designing an impact management approach

-  Clarity of impact goals and purpose
-  Moving from an audit to a learning mindset
-  Engaging with stakeholders
-  Determining level of impact
-  Choosing social impact measurement toolbox
-  Integrating grantmaking, venture philanthropy, and impact investment approaches
-  Rigor, proportionality, and attribution
-  Including a shared measurement agenda -across funders and sectors
-  Re-iterating, course-correcting, and growing in confidence

02

Resourcing and organizing for impact management

-  Resourcing impact management
-  Organizing for impact management
-  Busting silos

03 Embedding impact management through organizational culture

-  Ensuring that the Board and C-level lead the process
-  Spreading an impact mindset in the organization
-  Moving towards a shared learning approach with grantees
-  Becoming a learning organization

Impact Management Learning Journey Roadmap for Charitable Foundations

05

Collaborating, sharing knowledge and being transparent to support impact management

-  Developing joint initiatives
-  Engaging in honest and frequent sectoral exchange
-  Leveraging data and technology

04

Building internal and external capacity to manage impact

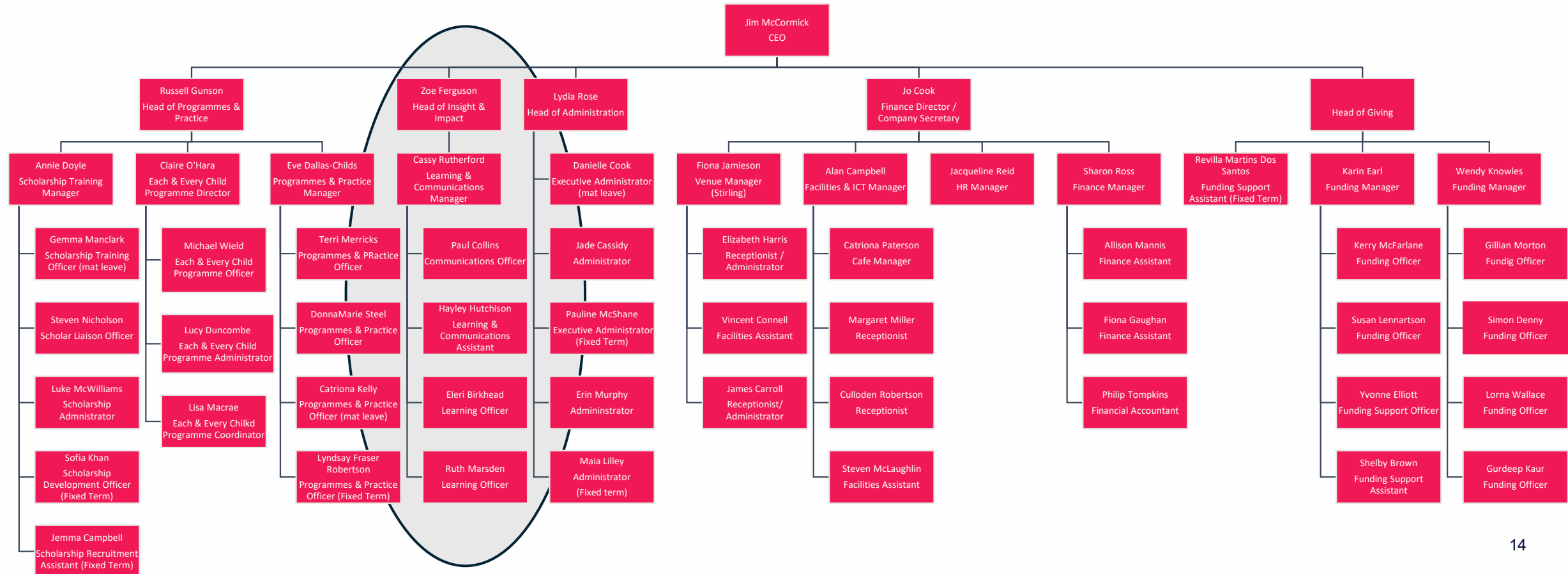
-  Building staff capacity
-  Building grantee capacity

Example – The Robertson Trust

- Founded in **1961**
- The **typology** of the fund is multiple: legacy, community foundation and grant-making.
- **Medium size fund**, in 2024 they provided **€14 million** in grants.
- **Mission:** supporting organizations and initiatives in Scotland aimed at alleviating poverty and trauma.



Example – The Robertson Trust



Example – The Robertson Trust

Core Questions

Why should we act?

- What do we know about causes of poverty / trauma?
- What is changing for people and communities?
- Where are the opportunities / new ideas for change?
- Why should we - particularly TRT - act?

What will we do?

- What is the change we want to see?
- What is the contribution we will make – alongside others?
- How will we know the difference we help to make (or not)?

What difference are we making / how?

- What is the change we are enabling?
- How is change being enabled? What is getting in the way?
- Where does the power lie in making change / are we enabling that to shift?
- How systemic is change?

So what?

- What should we do more of / less of / stop?
- How do we do something different?
- What does this mean for our role / how we work?



The
Robertson
Trust

Example – The Robertson Trust

Financial Security	Nurturing Relationships	Education Pathways	Work Pathways
We want to see a Scotland where people are financially secure and able to live free of poverty and poverty-related trauma.	We want to see a Scotland where people, families and communities can thrive and not be trapped in cycles of poverty and trauma.	We want to see an education system in Scotland which acts as a pathway out of poverty.	We want to see a Scotland where paid work is a more reliable route out of poverty. We want to contribute to tackling the drivers of in-work poverty and to removing barriers so that more people can access fair work.
FS1: Improving income adequacy	NR1: Reducing and preventing trauma among families	EP1: Improving attainment and development	WP1: Improving sustained employment rates
FS2: Strengthening income security	NR2: Reducing and preventing trauma for individuals	EP2: Improving engagement in education, learning and/or training	WP2: Improving pay, hours and earnings
FS3: Ensuring the cost of essentials are affordable and predictable	NR3: Reducing and preventing trauma in place-based communities	EP3: Improving access to education, retention and success rates	WP3: Improving the quality of work
FS4: Improving financial safety nets	NR4: Reducing and preventing the impact of trauma within specific population groups.	EP4: Encouraging and increasing parental/guardian engagement in education and learning	WP4: Strengthening worker rights, enforcement and improving employment practices

Example – Argidius Foundation



- Founded in **1956**
- The **typology** of the fund is multiple: family philanthropy, grant making
- Argidius helps individuals, families and whole communities **move away from poverty through access to decent, fulfilling and paid work**. For this to happen, many more quality jobs in emerging economies are needed.
- Argidius **partners with business support organizations** to help SMEs grow and generate employment.

Example – Argidius Foundation



Activities:



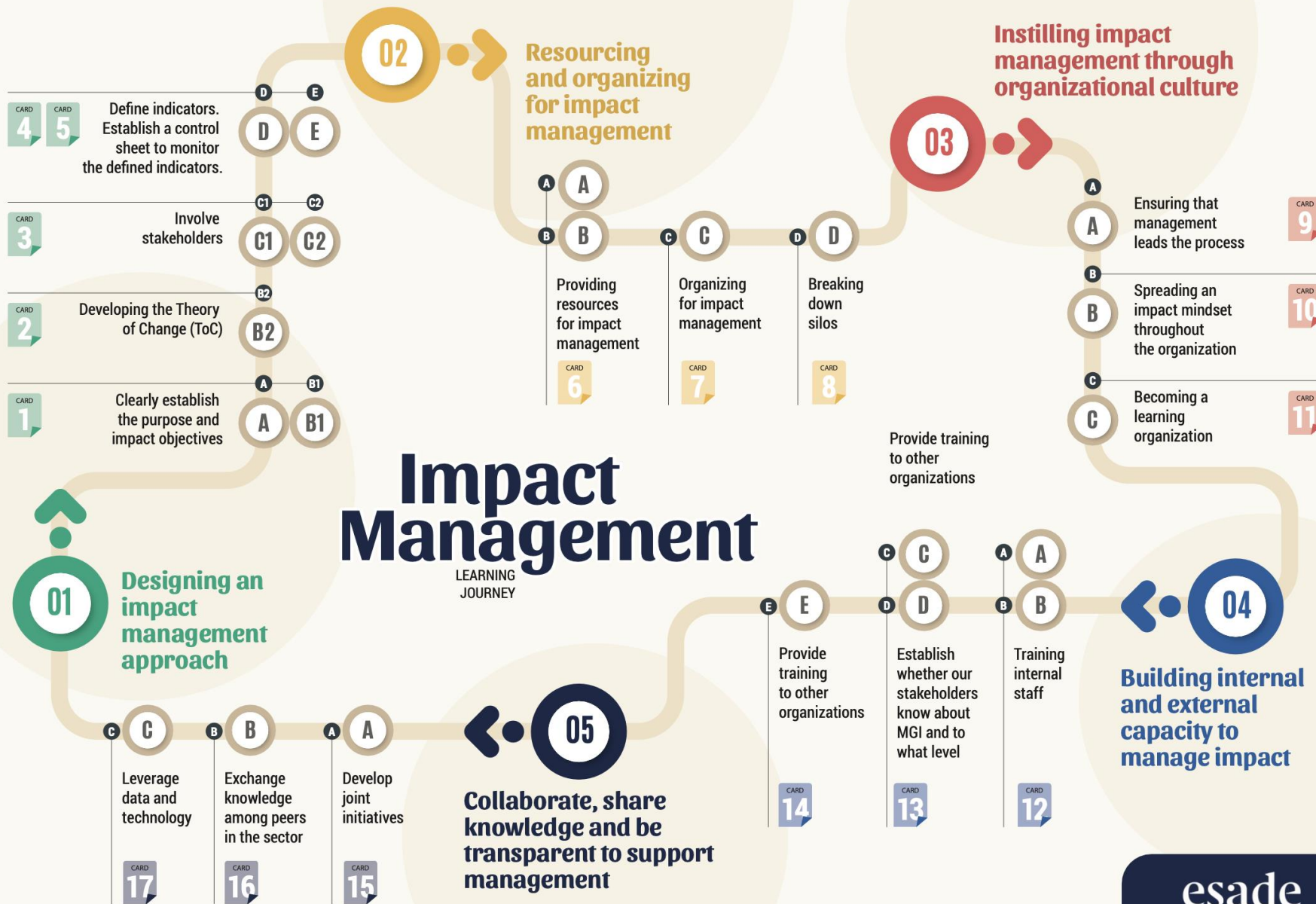
Enablers:



Figure 3. Average score for each of the 5 themes

— European Diagnostic Survey CoP on IMM 2021 (N=19) — Danish CoP 2026 (N=12)

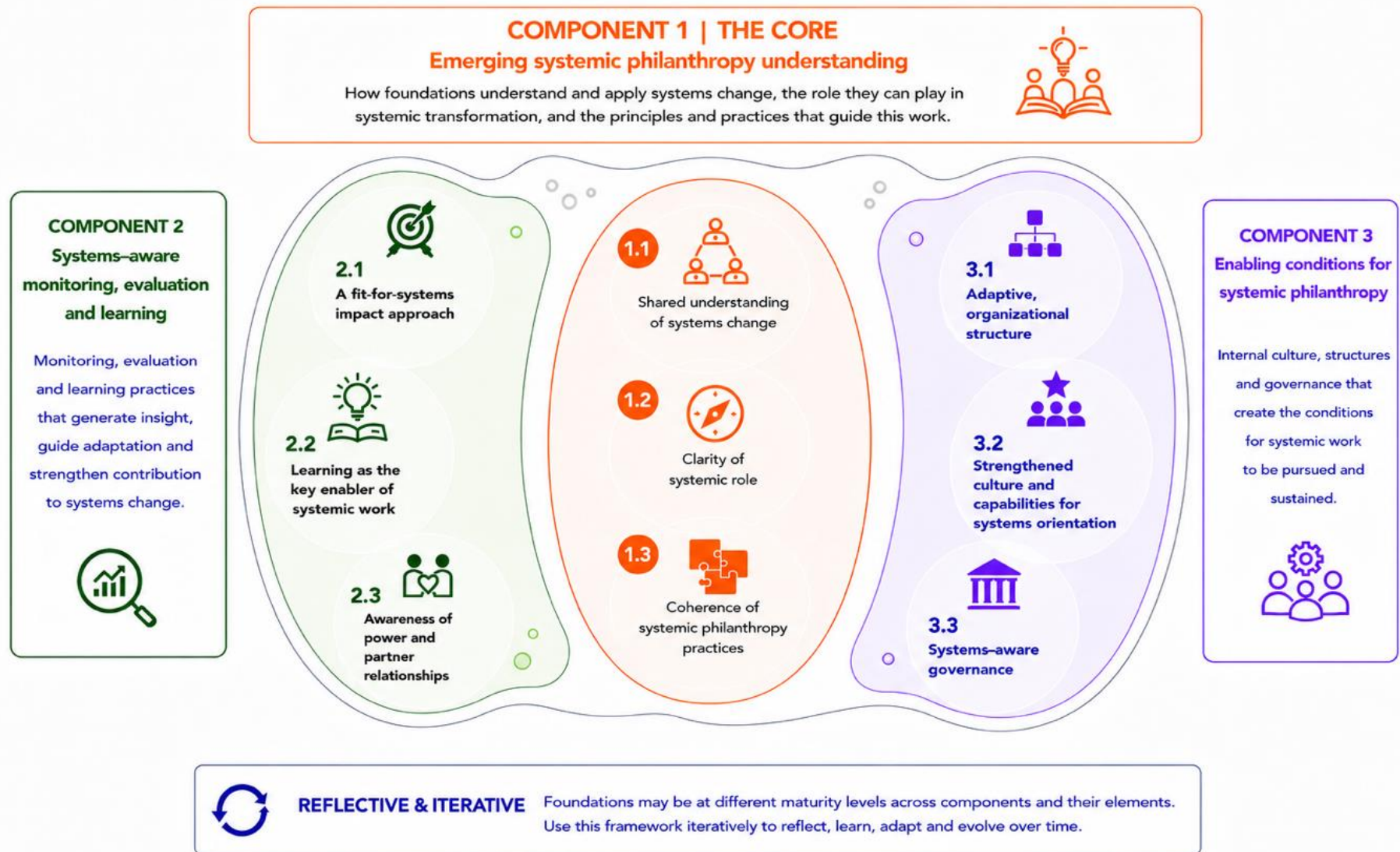




Systems Change Philanthropy Research Project

Name of foundation	 Robert Bosch Stiftung	 Laudes Foundation	 Co Impact A GLOBAL COLLABORATIVE FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE	 IKEA Foundation	 Carasso Daniel & Nina Fundación afiliada a la Fundación de France	 bbk
Geography	Germany (HQ) (operates primarily in Germany and Europe as well as selected global regions).	Netherlands / Switzerland (HQ) (operates primarily in Africa / Asia / Europe / LAC)	USA (HQ), operates globally (primarily in Africa, Asia, Latin America)	Global (HQ in Amsterdam, supporting projects mainly in Asia and Africa)	France / Spain	Spain (primarily Bizkaia)
Sectors of activity	• Health • Education • Global issues	• Finance & Capital markets • Fashion • Built environment	• Education • Health • Economic opportunity	• Energy • Land, Food & Forests • Building & Transport • Emergency Response	• Sustainable Food Systems • Citizen Art	• Entrepreneurship / People / Culture / Climate
Systems lens / experience	• Systems practice across the foundation • Moving towards development of foundation-wide MEL principles/ practices including systems change	• Considers itself a systems change funder although works by industry • Developed systemic ToC and evaluative rubrics methodology; strong use of developmental evaluation	• Collaborative systems change funder • Strongly codified and consistent approach to systems change and associated MEL	• Aspiration towards increasing systems change strategy/funding, currently in strategic redesign	• Considers itself a systems change funder • Organic and decentralised approach to MEL being currently redesigned	• Place-based and ecosystem funder
Charitable spending (2025)	Euro 195m (2025)	Euro 64.1m (2025)	Not disclosed	404m€ (2025)	23,5M€ (2025)	Euro 12m (2025)

Systemic MEL as a core dimension of systemic philanthropy



More on Systemic MEL

Systemic Lever	Explanation	MEL indicators / markers
 Policy change and regulation reform	Changing laws, rules and standards to shape system behavior. Philanthropy can support or engage in advocacy, policy design, evidence generation, and policy implementation capacity.	Contributions to public policy processes, changes in institutional dynamics, government interest, procurement changes, regulatory changes, adoption of approaches by government or other organizations.
 Solution experimentation / innovation	Help to experiment and test immature solutions that can prevent/address the systemic challenge	Interest in replication, including adoption of demonstrative projects by the market or government, growth in markets, growing demand to learn from a model, invitations to forums, requests for partnerships, and trust.
 Solution scaling	Help to scale proven solutions that can prevent/address the systemic challenge	Resource flows (e.g. capital mobilized), market share (if appropriate)
 Knowledge and evidence	Foundations can invest in research, learning infrastructures, community knowledge, data systems, and sensemaking processes that inform action and challenge assumptions.	Production and dissemination of new knowledge
 Human capital development	Build human capital (professionals / leaders) to advance the field	Shifts in mindsets, attitudes and behaviors, such as increased awareness, increased engagement, changes in professional practices.
 Orchestration and network	Foster collaboration and bring together actors in the field. This can happen through an orchestrator role or an activator role.	Health of the ecosystem being supported, including stronger collaboration, stronger networks, new partnerships, actors who did not previously speak to one another becoming connected, quality of relationships, ecosystem dynamics and trust etc.
 Power dynamics	Change system intervention design and evaluation process to more equitably include final beneficiaries as co-creators and decision-makers.	Local capacity and ownership, including stakeholder engagement, emerging champions, how partners see themselves and their role in the ecosystem, ecosystem actors taking the work forward themselves.
 Narratives	Shift social norms, public awareness and narrative change within the system. Target the problematic mindsets key stakeholders have.	How often words or ideas appear at institutional or societal levels; narrative shifts; cultural and attitudinal changes.

More on Systemic MEL

Shift	Fixing	Systemic Change
From value as predefined to we-defined.	Value predefined by people and organisations with power in relation to an intervention's goal and design.	Value defined pluralistically by a diverse 'we', including those involved and affected, future generations, nonhuman species, and the environment.
From fixed and singular to open and multidimensional value.	Value as fixed, singular and stable, set within the scale and timeframe of an intervention.	Value as multidimensional, relative to multiple scales and timeframes, and in flux.
From retrospective to prospective value.	Value as retrospective about whether an intervention worked based on evidence and criteria.	Value as prospective about whether and how a change process could be better informed by evidence, criteria, and imagination.
From technical to moral-political process.	Value determination as a technical process that informs instrumental users and generates knowledge.	Value development as a moral-political process involving deliberation about the 'rightness' of efforts, which generates legitimacy.

Source: Emily F. Gates / Pablo Vidueira, Evaluative Inquiry for Systemic Change – A Guide to Shift Beyond Fixes to Lasting Value

3

Concluding insights

Importance of the relational and the power of hope

- Evaluation and evaluative processes can be more joyful and playful
- People will still be at the heart of evaluation and its use
- In the current polycrisis, evaluators need to step up to work more on systems-level dimensions of change

Slido: key take-away from this keynote

