



Evaluating Community Organising

*How can we understand the impact of organising
(should we be doing evaluation, is it possible, and if yes,
how?)*

Produced by



About this paper

The title to this paper captures the questions the Civic Power Fund (CPF) has been asking itself as a funder that exists exclusively to support power building in excluded communities through community organising.

As CPF was establishing itself, an early donor [\[1\]](#) asked Hidden Depths Research (HDR) to identify some indicators that could show the impact of its investment within a geography and over a time horizon of around 5 years.

That is, how would the CPF know if power had been built, or impacted, by its funding?

Given the nascent stage of CPF, this question became inextricably tied to a journey of reflection and discussion about:

- Definitions of organising
- CPF strategy
- The appropriateness and feasibility of 'evaluation'
- What do we want evaluation for?

- How does our approach to evaluation fit with the approach we want to take as a funder?

When it comes to evaluation, definitions and description of activities really matter. It is impossible to determine an evaluation approach without agreement about what it is that is being evaluated and without consensus on what ‘effectiveness’ or ‘success’ looks like.

Evaluation is a specific branch of social science research and can use qualitative and/ or quantitative methods.

There are two kinds of evaluation:

1. **Impact evaluation:** assesses effectiveness in achieving goals.
2. **Process evaluation:** determines whether activities have been implemented as intended.

Sometimes, process and impact evaluations are conducted together. This helps to understand why the activities might not be delivered as they were intended and helps to determine if changes to the intended activities influences effectiveness.

As such, instating a set of progress indicators and an accompanying approach to gathering evidence relating to these wasn’t going to be straightforward. In acknowledgement of this, the CPF, with HDR, set out to talk to the field and co-produce an evaluation approach and indicators, as part of a discussion about the work of organisers and how they look at their own effectiveness.^[2] It was hoped that CPF could use the resultant evaluation approach with its own grantees, and that it might also be of utility to other funders of organising and organisers themselves.

These conversations have shaped the CPF’s understanding about evaluating the impact of organising. They have contributed to how the CPF, or indeed anyone else who shares the same interest, might know what difference channelling additional resources specifically to community organising (rather than other social justice grant making) has made in the UK. However, this hasn’t resulted in a traditional evaluation framework or theory of change. Fundamentally, discussions with the field threw into question whether evaluation indicators agreed for a predetermined timeline really reveal anything useful to funders and organisers alike.

In the end, the outcome of this exercise is a recommendation for CPF’s to adopt a collaborative *learning* approach, not a framework for impact evaluation. This recommendation could be transferred to other funding settings and change approaches and sits within a wider debate about the true value of ‘evaluating impact’ in philanthropy more generally.

This paper recommends dropping the term evaluation. In doing so, the CPF and organisers are free of the unworkable methodological constraints this imposes,

as well as the sense of threat and competition evaluation inspires. It paves the way to embed learning that can be useful to funders as well as the groups/communities they support.

The central principle is that if the learning isn't useful to organised groups, it won't be useful to funders who have financially backed a belief that organising *is* a transformative and effective approach to achieving social justice. The goal is not to test whether this is the case, nor is it to determine who is the best at doing it.

The goal is instead to – for the first time:

- build a picture of the ways in which organising is building power in the UK;
- gather evidence on how this can best be supported; and,
- better understand where there are opportunities to wield power that has been built.

Square peg, round hole

Research has shown that philanthropic foundations make very little contribution to community organising in the UK – but that interest in doing so is increasing. [3] It is not surprising then, that funders have been unclear about how to monitor the progress of organising and to report on the impact of funding it to their Boards.

Funders who have backed organising as an approach to change have tended to apply the kind of metrics that they have applied (mostly inadequately) to the evaluation of policy advocacy. This is generally a top-down process whereby the funder, often with their evaluator, determines what counts as progress. This process involves looking across funding programme outcomes and what the grantee said they would deliver in their grant application. Organisers/ organised groups who receive grants tend to fall in with this and try to speak to their funders in the language to which they have become accustomed to, that of policy advocacy and campaign wins and losses.

Organised groups might employ policy advocacy, they might also lead or support campaigns. They may provide services to communities (like advice, or emergency grants, for example) or mobilise people to turn out in protest – physically or remotely. But these activities don't define organising and so trying to measure the impact of these change approaches doesn't help to understand how *organising works on power*.

So far as this research can tell, organisers in the UK are mostly not reporting on power building, even though organisers/ organised groups are actively considering the extent to which they are building the power of communities. They do this in their power mapping, in their reflections following actions and in discussions to develop and revise tactics to achieve change. This isn't what funders have been asking for and funders haven't realised the need to ask organisers how they can describe the impact of their work in a way which is meaningful. A collective learning opportunity is being missed which, if philanthropic funding to community organising is to increase beyond the current paltry amount (less than

1% [4]), ought to be addressed to inform strategic support of this approach to change in the future.

Organising delivers change by working on and with power. It seeks to build the power of individuals and groups. It recognises the power of solidarity and collective action. It recognises where power is over-reached and abused. It knows too the potential of countervailing power in limiting the opportunities for grossly unequal distribution of power to do damage.

Organising recognises that power is necessary to deliver change and it is unequally distributed in communities. Those with the least power are also the most impacted by the decisions and actions of those with the most. Power, therefore, needs constant countervailing forces. Organising seeks to be an effective countervailing force by unleashing the power potential of communities of place and people. It does this by developing leadership, supporting groups to form and deploy tactics for change and to continue to do this independently and on their own terms.

Organisers define power as simply the ability to act. There are lots of factors that affect the ability of people and groups to act. Some of them are highly visible and can be used to control the actions of others, like laws, political power, institutional power, corporate power. But power also keeps a low profile, holding people at the deepest level. It can shape people's belief systems, narratives about issues and groups of people and even how we feel about ourselves – our sense of self-worth and agency.

The point of organising is to improve people's ability to act on the issues, (laws, institutions, narratives, etc) that affect them. It does this by supporting their analysis of a) how power impacts their lives and b) how they can take power to challenge this.

Organising is said to be 'grassroots' because it looks to build power amongst those who are least able to act. These are the communities (of place or experience) that are most directly affected by unequal power conditions. It must begin with these communities and organised groups must, therefore, include active involvement of these. Those closest to the issue must also be or become those who lead others into action on the issue.

Over the long term, organising should transform traditional hierarchies and power structures. These exist in society generally, and this includes civil society and the charitable sector. It's not the purpose of this paper to take a view on whether this is necessarily a good or bad thing, but in setting out how funders might understand what their investment in organising has delivered, it is the job of this paper to lay bare this fact. The approach to philanthropy and the approach to evaluation and learning are inextricably linked. The following have been given as examples of the ways in which the charitable/ philanthropic sector perpetuates the 'status quo', rather than transforms power dynamics for lasting social change:

- Funders often set the agenda with programme requirements/ goals
- Grantees - eager for funding - describe their work in terms that will fit these criteria
- Funding programmes and grants are generally short term (often for reasons that funders themselves can't change)
- Stated time periods condition applicants to think in terms of 'projects' and funders to think in terms of 'restricted' grants.
- Funders often want to fund campaigns and see organising as part of that. The campaign is the approach to change for the funder - not organising.
- Having a focus on projects or campaigns then results in focus on outputs and outcomes that might be possible in a period, rather than work that lays foundations for future change. Note that outcomes are based on best guesses, given a constantly shifting context.
 - Evaluation approaches follow suit, counting outputs and trying to demonstrate outcomes and 'achievements' (did the campaign win?)
 - Where outcomes aren't 'met', there is then fear that future funding will not be secured. As a result, independent evaluations and internally produced impact reports often read like a list of 'achievements' and don't advance understanding about the effectiveness of efforts towards goals. A learning opportunity is then missed, given that these goals are often shared between different funders and organisations.
- A focus on relatively short-term outcomes adds to the sense of competition for limited resources between civil society organisations and impedes collaboration and solidarity as each wants to claim the 'win'.
- There is a focus on organisations coming in from the outside to help/ 'save' people. Again, this paper makes no judgement about this. But it is important to note that this is distinctly different to organising, which is about communities acting for themselves and on their own terms. Organising maintains that people must 'do' for themselves.
- Groups who are not registered charities (with associated governance structures) are often not in scope for funding. Organised groups are often not charities and have no ambition to become one.

A framework for building understanding about community power

Rather than set out indicators, it is proposed that the CPF works together with grantees to gather reflections on their activity. The suggested 'reflections' in the table below are based on conversations with the field. They include interim reflections that lean more towards 'process evaluation' and longer-look back (end of grant) reflections that lean more towards 'impact evaluation'. These have been deliberately drafted to complement the questions that organisers/ organised groups ask of themselves at regular intervals as part of their own tactical discussions.

Whilst these might be suitable to most organised groups, they might not work well for everyone and all CPF grantees. It is recommended that CPF shares these with grantees and invites refinement so that the aims of the funded group are truly reflected. The goal is to avoid the 'square peg, round hole' scenario

explained above whilst at the same time, capturing evidence that speaks to the characteristics fundamental to organising.

It is also recommended that the CPF initially implements this as a pilot with a cohort of grantees who work with different communities, on different issues, are at different stages of development, are of differing sizes and organisational structures (charitable status, union/ membership organisation/ community group, etc).

A chief concern amongst those who engaged in this research was the time and resource that evidencing the power building work of organisers could steal from the actual task itself. Evidence collected relating to the below table might be gathered in part by interview/ check-in conducted by a third party and independent researcher. It may also be populated by organisers sharing updates or notes that they make anyway about their work. It might form the basis for their regular internal reflection. It is certainly not intended to be written up in long-hand by grantees.

Finally, the CPF might consider resource for a research/ researcher(s) who can take a ‘walking with’ approach to both test the ability to gather accounts based on the below, to draft ‘end of grant’ case studies that speak to power built and can look across grants for learning about power building that the CPF has supported.

Key reflections on activity	What might be included at interim	What might be included at end of grant
<p>Building understanding Building collective power starts with listening to the concerns and motivations of people about their lives and communities.</p> <p>This informs understanding of power mapping of the issue and therefore informs tactics (actions, alliances, relationships, narrative, etc)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description about the issue, how it impacts people/ the group, the extent of the issue, who else might be experiencing it, the conditions that give rise to it, any power mapping of the issue. • Description of who is being listened to. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the understanding of the issue and group has developed over time. • Reflections on how the conditions that gave rise to the issue have changed. • How a power map of the issue/ group has changed and why.

<p>Developing leaders This is largely about developing people who can take others with them into action. It is about equipping them with the resources and skills they need to have broader reach, deeper networks, wider alliances.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extent of leadership potential (how many and who could current leaders take into an action). • Evidence of leaders' journeys. • Confidence to speak up in public. • Negotiation skills. • Ability to build relationships with other people who can add support/ weight to actions or deepen understanding about the issue and conditions for change. <p>Note: Leaders are called organisers in some settings. It is the conclusion of this research that the title of the role is much less important than a shared understanding of what the role is. To this end, it is recommended that the CPF adopts the vocabulary of the grantee for this.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have they been able to coach someone else? • Have they been able to tell a public story about the issue(s)? • Have they found ways to talk about power? • Have they deepened or broadened their reach? • Are they taking people with them into action?
<p>Key reflections on activity</p>	<p>What might be included at interim</p>	<p>What might be included at end of grant</p>
<p>Building the capacity of individuals from the affected community Personal change observed in individuals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence to speak to others about the issue. • Computer skills, language, or whatever it is that is required to build the capacity of individual people to act. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has the affected group/ community grown in confidence (in the opinion of the group/ community, not the organiser). • Does the group collectively have a deeper understanding of the power conditions that impact them and of their own power to affect change?

<p>Actions Planned activity by the organised group.</p>	<p>Description of actions which might feature protest, gatherings, attendance at meetings with people who have visible power, media attention, litigation, etc. Note that actions are to be self-defined and specific to each grant.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which actions were most significant and why? • What was learned from actions taken?
<p>Key reflections on activity</p>	<p>What might be included at interim</p>	<p>What might be included at end of grant</p>
<p>Participation and commitment This helps to understand the size and composition of the group, especially the extent to which the active group is made up of people most impacted by the issue/ with the least power.</p>	<p>This might include, but is not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The numbers of members of an organised group. • Attendance levels at events/ meetings/ actions. • The extent to which those participating represent the community who are becoming organised. 	<p>As interim but it total at end of grant”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the group numbers/ characteristics change and why? • Whose power was built?
<p>Alliances and connection This is about relationships. Who is working together and how does this strengthen the chances of the organised group achieving its aims?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there awareness of the alliances needed to ‘win’, as well as alliances that it is necessary to disrupt? • Are connections/ relationships being built between other groups who can act in solidarity or share the same aims? • Are relationships being built with people within the community who could raise the profile of the issue locally (but might not be directly impacted by it, e.g. community figures such as head teachers, councillors, etc). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have connections been made beyond the core group? • Is there a sense of allegiance objectives? • Is there any sign of a shared consciousness as a wider movement around the issue? • Is there evidence of a more connected ecosystem around the issue?

Key reflections on activity	What might be included at interim	What might be included at end of grant
<p>Progress towards goals This is about reflection on where the group are in achieving campaign goals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Wins’ (as defined by the group), or extent of progress towards them. These can be indicative of power built. <p>It is noted that good organising can happen without a single ‘win’ being achieved within the lifetime of the grant.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Wins’ to be counted/ described again. However, funds organising, not single campaigns so this is not fundamental. • Views on leverage the group now has over visible power.
<p>Beyond the first campaign Evidence that the group is building out from the issue that originally brought them together.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the group speaking out/ organising around other issues/ campaigns? • Is the group continuing beyond a lost campaign? <p>Note this is optional as interim reporting.</p>	<p>As interim.</p>
<p>Sustainability This is about the strength and resilience of the group.</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there evidence of a core group that stay engaged? • If a lead organiser was to be removed/ leave, action still occur? • Has the community built enough capacity to continue to work together? • Does the group/ organisation have enough financial backing to continue?

End note

Measuring social change impact is difficult. True impact evaluation requires a fixed baseline and the ability to measure the counterfactual. Whilst there are many textbooks and papers about evaluation methodology, this is an unarguable fact. The reality of most real-world evaluations which don’t use control groups and apply experiment conditions is that they use an imperfect, but best possible approach (especially given budget) to say something that others would agree is

defensible, if they had access to the same evidence. It is this which the charitable sector has come to call ‘evaluation’.

Grant makers and grantees alike try to speak to a theory of change (which ties activity to outcomes), but they can’t determine the accuracy of it. This is true of almost all evaluations undertaken for and on behalf of civil society. Learning is acquired along the way but, the truth is that we don’t have a good grasp on how to understand the impact of traditional social change approaches and, what we do have, certainly doesn’t help us to understand the impact of community organising.

The answer, at least for now, is a paradigm shift. The shift is away from funders looking to *justify* their support for organising by focussing on campaign wins, to funders looking to deepen their understanding about how organising is building power in communities. This is as much about process evaluation (how organising is done) as it is impact evaluation (its outcomes and the difference it makes). In the short term, this amounts to Boards hearing descriptions of the good organising that they have supported and the hope that, if enough of it happens, foundations will be laid for more fundamental change.

[1] Unbound Philanthropy and as part of an existing contract to support Unbound Philanthropy’s MEL activity

[2] Hidden Depths Research undertook 11 interviews and one discussion group. In addition, significant desk research was undertaken by HDR and CPF. No directly transferable evaluation approach was identified in that process – for definitional and practical reasons.

[3] Jon Cracknell and Eliza Baring, Funding Justice, May 2021

<https://www.civicpower.org.uk/where-do-social-justice-grants-go>.

[4] Ibid.

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The Civic Power Fund is the UK’s first pooled donor fund dedicated to community organising. We raise money from foundations, trusts and philanthropic funders and strategically redistribute it through progressive and participatory grantmaking. By investing in grassroots organising, we aim to unleash the power of people to improve their lives and their communities and dismantle the barriers to racial, economic, gender, disability, migration, climate and LGBTQ+ justice.

You can find out more about us at www.civicpower.org.uk

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