EVALUATION
RUBRIC

QUANTITATIVE
DATA

CASE EXAMPLES

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EVALUATIVE RUBRICS

Malene Soenderskov & Savi Mull

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EVALUATIVE RUBRICS

In an international development sector that opts for systemic changes in the way we produce, explore natural resources or address inequality or gender based violence, change and its significance is not easily captured by traditional metrics. In response, foundations, international CSOs and multilateral agencies have explored the use of evaluation rubrics to meaningfully assess, communicate and learn from complex, qualitative dimensions of change. Y et using rubrics do not come without certain dilemmas and challenges either. In this article, two rubrics experts describe some of the benefits and challenges – that we have witnessed when introducing rubrics thinking in programmes aimed at systems change.

Malene Soenderskov and Savi Mull are measurement and evaluation experts that have experience in using rubrics with philanthropies, donors and partners.

New strategies require new approaches to assess progress

Over the course of the years, more and more organizations have focused on systemic changes in the way we manage natural resources or divide resources and rights between communities, rather than responding to the problems these systems cause. Y et systems change presents unique measurement challenges due to its dependence on multiple emergent factors that interact in unpredictable ways. In these uncertain scenarios, traditional Monitoring,

Evaluation and Learning (MEL) approaches that merely report on project achievements fall short of identifying the early signs of change or capturing the incremental progress (or not) that often characterizes systems change.

Pioneered by Jane Davidson and Thomaz Chianca, and currently being used by climate and nature focused philanthropies such as Laudes Foundation, evaluation rubrics represent an innovative approach to measure and learn while implementing strategies in complex settings.

Evaluation rubrics acknowledges that systems are inherently interconnected, with causal and change pathways influenced by complexity and different factors, diverse actors, varied operational modalities and multiple intervention approaches. Contextual shifts – whether political transitions, social developments or emergencies like conflicts and natural disasters – further complicate the change landscape. Within these dynamic systems, certain stakeholders may work to maintain the status quo while others simultaneously drive toward progressive outcomes.

Evaluative rubrics provide the flexibility to monitor and assess these competing forces without oversimplification, offering meaningful insights and learning amid complexity.

[1] https://realevaluation.com/what-are-rubrics/
[2] https://www.laudesfoundation.org/how-we-work/measuring-with-rubrics/

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EVALUATIVE RUBRICS

How are rubrics different?

Like traditional results frameworks, evaluation rubrics can be used for Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL), to structure our thinking, define success, and support accountability and learning. Y et they reflect different assumptions about how change happens and how it should be assessed.

While traditional results frameworks define and track results (outputs, outcomes, impacts) along a program logic or theory of change, and focus on activities and achievements, evaluation rubrics complement that picture and judge the quality of results within the (complex) context or system in which they are produced, using clearly defined criteria and standards.

Through this contextual awareness, rubrics define success relative to specific operating conditions rather than applying universal, absolute standards, and they recognises that the significance of a legislative change, for example, depends on the context in which it is introduced. Rubrics recognize different starting points and structural constraints, and success is not defined by a single indicator or criteria but by relative progress toward that indicator, considering what is realistically achievable.

As such the rubric framework provides a more accurate measurement of value and contribution, and acknowledges that organizations deserve recognition for their contributions to change even within challenging, non-enabling environments where progress can be hard to trace and achieve.

Center Work Rubric

☺	😐	☹
I completed my work.	Some of my work is incomplete.	I did not compl-ete my wrk at all.
My work is done correctly.	Some of my wor is done incorrectly.	I did not do my work correctly at al.
My work is neat and tidy.	Some of my work is neat and tidy.	My work is not neat and tidy at all
I put my BEST work and effort in my center work.	I put some effort in my center work.	I did not put any effort in my center work.

Evaluation Rubrics in its most simple form.

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THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF EVALUATIVE RUBRICS

Example I: Assessing success of a program to strengthen women's cooperatives.

Defining success, using indicators

Objective:
Women's cooperatives in Bangladesh sustain incomes for their members.

Succes indicator:
80 percent of cooperatives maintains profit margins above 20%, holds monthly governance meetings, and has formalized business plans.

While an assessment against the indicator will provide a clear idea of the extent to which the goal was achieved, it does not take into account the contextual challenges that different cooperatives may face, their level of maturity when the program started or the skills among its members.

Defining success using rubrics

Objective:
Women's cooperatives in Bangladesh sustain incomes for their members.

Succes Indicator:
Replaced by a rubric. In a rubric "success" is not a single point or indicator, but a continuum, and what counts as "strong" or "transformative" is anchored in the cooperative's environment and constraints.

A cooperative operating in a high-risk area or consisting of illiterate members reaching "progressing" might reflect more meaningful or significant achievement than a coopera- tive reaching "strong" in a stable, urban context. As such, the rubrics allows us to fairly assess change and quality of that change in relation to what is realistically achievable—promoting equity, nuance, and learning.

Criterion	Emerging	Progressing	Strong	Transformative
Financial Sustainability	Covers basic operating costs through ad hoc sales	Has regular sales but depends on subsidies or donor support	Maintains positive cash flow with partial reinvestment and contingency planning	Fully self-sustaining, reinvesting profits and exploring growth/expansion opportunities
Governance Practices	Leadership is informal and irregularly meets	Holds occasional meetings with ad hoc decision-making	Has a formal leadership structure and meets monthly with member participation	Practices democratic governance, delegates roles effectively, and resolves conflicts transparently
Adaptation to Local Challenges	Struggles to respond to shocks (e.g., supply shortages, floods)	Reacts reactively but inconsistently to external challenges	Develops basic risk-mitigation strategies (e.g., backup suppliers, shared storage)	Proactively adapts operations based on risk forecasts, community feedback, and learning from past shocks

Example II: Assessing success of a program aimed to promote decent work in the garment sector.

Defining success, using indicators

Objective:
Women's cooperatives in Bangladesh sustain incomes for their members.
overnments guarantee labour rights.

Succes indicator:
More than 90% of the countries engaged in the program ratify ILO conventions.

While an assessment against the indicator will provide a clear idea of the extent to which the goal was achieved, it ignores the contextual challenges that the program might face, including limited political will, sector-wide norms and economic concerns.

Defining success using rubrics

Objective:
Governments guarantee labour rights.

Succes Indicator:
Replaced by a rubric where the definition of success is tailored to the context.

As such the rubric does not assume that the project must reach a situation where ILO conventions are systematically ratified and labour rights are implemented and monitored to be considered successful. It recognizes that even modest shifts (e.g. from a harmful to an emerging situation) can represent significant progress in hostile or constrained environments. And it allows evaluators and funders to track change in a way that is realistic, meaningful, and context-sensitive —encouraging continuous improvement rather than penalizing slow progress.

Harmful	Emerging	Progressing	Strong	Transformative
Governments in producer countries ignore and refrain from ratifying and aligning legal and regulatory frameworks with ILO Conventions protecting human rights and labour rights.	here is evidence of some mindset shift in production country governments towards ratifying specific ILO conventions and that they intend to bring these into power through legislation. Labour rights are largely unprotected and not being adequately monitored.	ome governments in production countries ratify and implement key ILO conventions and there is some progress in bringing them into power through legislation. Labour rights are being implemented and monitored to some extent.	Governments in production countries ratify and implement the most critical ILO conventions and bring them into power through legislation. Labour rights are generally implemented and monitored and workers can generally enjoy Freedom of association.	Governments in production countries systematically ratify, implement ILO Conventions and bring them into power through comprehensive legislation. Labour rights are implemented and monitored systematically, and workers enjoy Freedom of association.

Introducing rubrics is introducing a transformational shift in mindset

Although evaluation rubrics allows us to assess progress and achievements in the context in which they are created, our work with organisations have taught us that this step does not come without challenges.

Rubrics do not just represent a technical change, it is as much a cultural and mindset shift that challenges our idea on what data is important, what success looks like and how we report. In defining what good looks like, rubrics asks us to embrace complexity, make values explicit, and move from mainly assessing what happened to exploring what change is significant, how well it occurred and why it matters. The shift can be challenging — but ultimately transformative for organizations committed to learning, meaningful impact and a more substantial dialogue with their donors about what matters and why.

Below are some of the common concerns that we have met in our work with organisations who have embraced rubrics and how they can be addressed:

Rubrics are qualitative and hence subjective

Many organizations are accustomed to measuring success through predefined indicators and numeric targets that are perceived as 'objective' simply because they are numeric. The idea of making qualitative, value-based judgments can, therefore, feel imprecise and open to interpretation. Y et

as argued by Julian King, evaluative judgements are not subjective if they are supported by credible evidence, explicit values and logical argument. This is what judges do all the time to make a judgement.

Making qualitative judgements also challenges our idea of what constitutes 'real data', our existing data collection toolkits and routines. If organizations are accustomed to capture change with numerical indicators only, then the types of evidence that rubrics require—such as analysing the discourse in public articles, conducting key informant interviews with stakeholders to get their perspectives, or 'simply' engaging in qualitative observations, might feel unsettling.

As a result, rubrics are sometimes dismissed as too complex or resource-intensive to implement although, in our experience, it might be even less time consuming and much more straight forward to introduce these sets of evaluative learning practices into the everyday routines of program staff, than applying the check-lists and coping with endless sets of quantitative data, normally used to assess performance against predefined, numerical indicators. Sometimes, assessing progress against a rubric might simply take a few observations with open eyes and a sense-making session with teams beyond MEL units.

Addressing these barriers requires both practical support—such as training, guidance, and facilitation—and a willingness to invest in new ways of capturing and making sense of impact.

3 https://www.julianking.co.nz/vfi/subjective/

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What do donors think?

The perception that qualitative assessments equals limited credibility is often reinforced by the belief that donors demand hard data and may not accept nuanced assessments. Y et in our experience, many funders continue to use quantifiable data as evidence on change while they increasingly recognize the limitations of purely quantitative reporting for measuring contribution to system change.

Donors increasingly seek both quantitative metrics and qualitative insights through case studies or change narratives when assessing or reporting impact. Evaluative rubrics offer a compelling solution by creating a framework that naturally synthesizes quantitative and qualitative evidence rather than treating them as separate reporting requirements.

This integrated approach enables more authentic dialogue between donors and grantees about actual progress and change. Rather than forcing artificial distinctions between numbers and stories, rubrics can facilitate honest conversations that acknowledge the complex realities grantees navigate in. This transparency supports adaptive management throughout implementation, allowing both parties to respond thoughtfully to evolving contexts rather than rigidly adhering to predeter- mined metrics that may no longer reflect on-the-ground realities. The framework thus transforms donor-grantee relationships from compliance-focused reporting to collaborative learning partnerships cantered on meaningful impact.

Rubrics questions our success

Rubrics require a fundamental shift in how we conceptualize success—a transition that can feel uncomfortable for those accustomed to absolute definitions of achievement. Rather than establishing success through specific indicators and simply asking whether outcomes were met, rubrics examine relative progress toward those indicators while accounting for what is realistically achievable within given circumstances. The shift from absolute to relative measurement acknowledges that meaningful progress often occurs along a spectrum rather than through clear-cut milestones.

As illustrated by textbox one above, achieving a state of 'progressing' might be even more impressive than achieving a state of 'transformative' if the 'starting point' for a women's cooperative was very poor or if the cooperative is operating in a very hostile and difficult context.

As such, rubrics challenge the conventional mindset that equates control with effectiveness and which assumes that change follows linear, predictable pathways with clearly defined end goals. They force us to articulate what "good enough" means, and this can feel political or risky if we are used to articulate success in terms of compliance with long-term goals for a sustainable and equitable world, or if think donors expect us to deliver on such goals within a short(er) period of time.

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3 https://www.julianking.co.nz/vfi/subjective/

Rubrics allow for expressions of early changes and later changes which then informs strategic adaptation for increased effectiveness towards intended changes. They embrace the fact that change is complex and rarely linear and straight forward. Organisations and donors who wish to embrace that reality, must become more comfortable with ambiguity, emergence or outcomes, and ongoing reflection.

Rubrics are not easy to formulate

As with any new tool or approach, rubrics must be practiced. Defining change criteria and collectively articulating quality standards for 'what good looks like' for terminologies like empowerment, enabling political contexts or 'resilience', can be difficult when done the first few times. And even more uncomfortable as these are terminologies we frequently use but rarely take time to reflect on in a deeper sense.

This complexity can make rubrics seem intimidating or impractical, especially when teams are already stretched for time and resources. Unlike the familiar structure of results frameworks, which rely on established templates and numeric indicators, that we don't need to spend much time to reflect on, if indicators are met, rubrics demand a more interpretive and participatory approach, because they force us to ask: how good or valuable are the results we have achieved. This may feel both unfamiliar or overly demanding.

Rubrics hijack our theories of change

While some organisations raise concerns that rubrics hijack the theory of change approach they have introduced and refined over the years, the opposite is in fact the case. Evaluation rubrics and Theory of Change (ToC) are highly complementary tools that, when used together, can significantly enhance the quality, transparency, and usefulness of evaluations and support the ongoing revision of a ToC and its assumptions.

Imagine a situation where financial sustainability, solid governance practices and ability to adapt to local challenge are preconditions (outcome) in a theory of change that informs the program in textbox one and its objective: Women's cooperatives in Bangladesh sustain incomes for their members.

3 https://www.julianking.co.nz/vfi/subjective/

Rubrics define what success might look like for these preconditions at each step of change – from a situation that is emerging to a situation that is transformative, and offers a framework for evidence-based judgment on the quality of change.

As such, the alignment between rubrics and theory of change creates a natural synergy. Both prioritize meaningful impact over comprehensive activity and output tracking and this convergence allows organizations to develop measurement systems that are both rigorous and manageable, while maintaining focus on substantive change.

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│ sustainable      │ │ governance       │ │ local            │
│                  │ │ practices        │ │ challenges       │
└──────────────────┘ └──────────────────┘ └──────────────────┘
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Are rubrics, outcome harvesting and other approaches compatible?

Once rubrics are established, organizations naturally question how to operationalize them for reporting purposes. Y et the evidence base draws from both qualitative and quantitative indicators (and can therefore easily be combined with monitoring activities that are well known to the organisation already, such as knowledge, attitude, practice (KAP) surveys or outcome harvesting), but spotlight the most valuable changes within specific contexts.

Our experience reveals that when donors recognize the value of evidence-based contribution reporting through rubrics, they frequently embrace this innovative measurement and learning framework. In many instances, donors become advocates for the approach, sometimes requesting rubric-based reporting as a supplement to existing requirements rather than a replacement.

This may be explained by the fact that rubrics reporting pay attention to and acknowledges the operating environments that have either

facilitated or hindered program implementation too. Rubrics-based reporting captures both early stages of change (named 'emerging' in textbox one and two above) and more mature signs of change relative to contextual realities. This includes recognizing instances where operating contexts have remained stable or improved —even when not directly attributable to program activities, these contextual factors represent important contributions to overall progress.

As such, the rubrics framework enables organizational teams and donors to collectively assess where changes are occurring, evaluate the pace of transformation, identify how their work has contributed and identify opportunities for incorporating new or refined approaches to support progress from one phase to the next. These collaborative assessments foster transparent dialogue with donors that extends beyond simply reporting changes to discussing where strategic adjustments might enhance effectiveness for a next phase of work. This honest, context-aware approach to measurement creates space for adaptive management while maintaining accountability to funders and stakeholders.

So are rubrics worth the effort?

Now, with the challenges associated with integrating a rubrics based measurement and learning approach, is it really worth the effort? Why not stick to our conventional habits and indicators which may have served us well?

In our experience the answer is simple.

First, because rubrics do not replace but reinforce indicators or other ways of assessing progress. Rubrics supplements and complement measurement indicators by providing an additional 'layer' of evaluative judgement relative to the context in which a program is implemented. And in doing so, they challenge us to moving from proving success through indicators or isolated 'most significant change stories' to improving practice and reflecting on 'what it takes' to move from one 'level of success' to the next. It challenges us to move from a focus on accountability to a focus on shared learning, and from individual control to collective sense-making about the value of the results we create.

Second, because rubrics offer a different language for us to talk about how – and why – we contribute to change. A language that embraces the ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity that often follows with programmatic interventions. A language that

14 https://juliankingnz.substack.com/p/different-kinds-of-rubrics

enables us to truly reflect on the value of our work in the context in which it is implemented, and a language that helps us define 'what comes next' in our continued journey to promote sustainability and a decent life for all. As such, rubrics do not just offer a framework to discuss the value of our work, but also insights informing strategic direction and inspiration for 'what comes next'

This dual approach for measurement and learning represents a fundamental shift over traditional approaches allowing organisations to both assess current impact and identify opportunities for increased effectiveness. By defining gradations of success, rubrics create a roadmap for continuous improvement while keeping focus on valuable changes rather than conventional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

Reach out
If you or your organization are interested to know more or to integrate a rubrics based measurement and learning approach in a program or strategic framework or to use it for an evaluation, please do reach out to us to learn more.

Malene Soenderskov and Savi Mull are measurement and evaluation experts that have experience in using rubrics with philanthropies, donors and partners.

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Who can use rubrics? Who are they for?

Evaluative rubrics can be used by organisations for their strategy, for programmes, and projects. They define what good looks like because they use a rating scale and descriptors for each scale.

As Julian King points out, rubrics can be structured in 'unlimited ways' - including holistic, generic, and analytic approaches - and these various approaches can be implemented based on the specific unit or universe of measurement required. Rubrics are ideally penned before change starts to take place. Evaluators, too,can recommend the use of rubrics for complex programmes that focus on non-linear, emergent changes within differing, operating contexts.

Organisations/programs can use rubrics:
- At start of strategy development, strategic review processes
- At defining programme strategy development or a review process
- During evaluations

Evaluators can use rubrics:
- In proposals if programmes are complex and focused on systems change
- During baseline, midline and endline processes
- For Developmental evaluations
- To support a multi-method evaluative approach

14 https://juliankingnz.substack.com/p/different-kinds-of-rubrics