Transforming granting through an evaluation lens

AES Conference, Wednesday 27th September, 2023

Alex Williamson, Jen Riley, and Kylie Kingston

QUT the university for the real world

SmartyGrants

An enterprise of ourcommunity.com.au

Where not-for-profits go for help

Origin story and motivations of this project

Arose through a discussion between Jen and Alex about the Outcomes Engine

Aim to explore how a software platform refracts practice and conceptual frames for evaluation

Grantmaking involves evaluation at the beginning of something, whereas evaluation is more often undertaken at the end of something

Kylie's interest and focus on including the voices of beneficiaries of grants adds another lens

Objectives

To explore the challenges of evaluating grantmaking, in particular evaluation of a portfolio of grants

To review the emerging role of technology

To examine a case exemplar software program

To explore the adoption, benefits, and opportunities of evaluation using grantmaking software.

To critique and discuss limitations, especially the voice of beneficiaries and danger of a narrow/process focus

To propose suggestions and ways forward for grant managers and grantees.

Evaluating Applications for funding

MOST EFFORT CURRENTLY

LITTLE EFFORT CURRENTLY

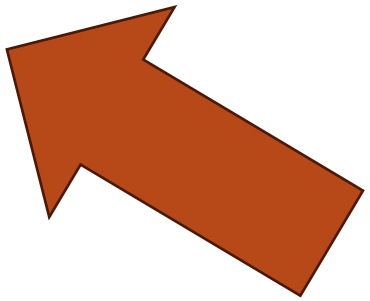
Single grant focused

Focused on multiple grants, or program/ system of grants

SOME EFFORT CURRENTLY AND GROWING

VERY LITTLE EFFORT CURRENTLY

Evaluating grant 'performance' or delivery



Underlying principles of grantmaking

- Grantmaking, or the allocation and distribution of funding, involves assessment and evaluation of applications against criteria (of some kind)
- But grantmaking may be done without applications, based on knowledge of the work and capacity of organisations and individuals
- Predetermined idea/vision/purpose of what grant(s) should enable
- Evaluated against likelihood of that being achieved, plus more

What's unique about the context of grantmaking, with regard to evaluation?

Evaluation of something that might/will happen in future, often based on something that is happening now in the present, or has happened in the past.

Unique group of actors and circumstances at a point in time.

In philanthropy, grantmaking and giving may be motivated by emotions, and evaluation may in some circumstances be inappropriate or harmful.

Organised and structured programs of grantmaking are rarely evaluated as a whole or as a collection/group of grants.

Who is making the grant(s)?

(individuals and roles)

- Grants officer, program manager, professional staff administrator,
- Often part-time, mostly women, mostly white
- The person or people who undertake the initial evaluation of applications, proposals or organisations are often not those who make the final decision.
- Typically referred to a board or delegated committee for final approval
- Summary information only is provided, grouped by recommendations
- Questioning tends to be ad hoc, rather than first principles

Source of the grant funds (organisations and institutions)

Grantmaking is done primarily by governments at local, state and federal levels

Philanthropic organisations make grants for public benefit within a range of regulatory boundaries

Less common for for-profit companies to have grants programs, but may be through a CSR program or through sponsorships

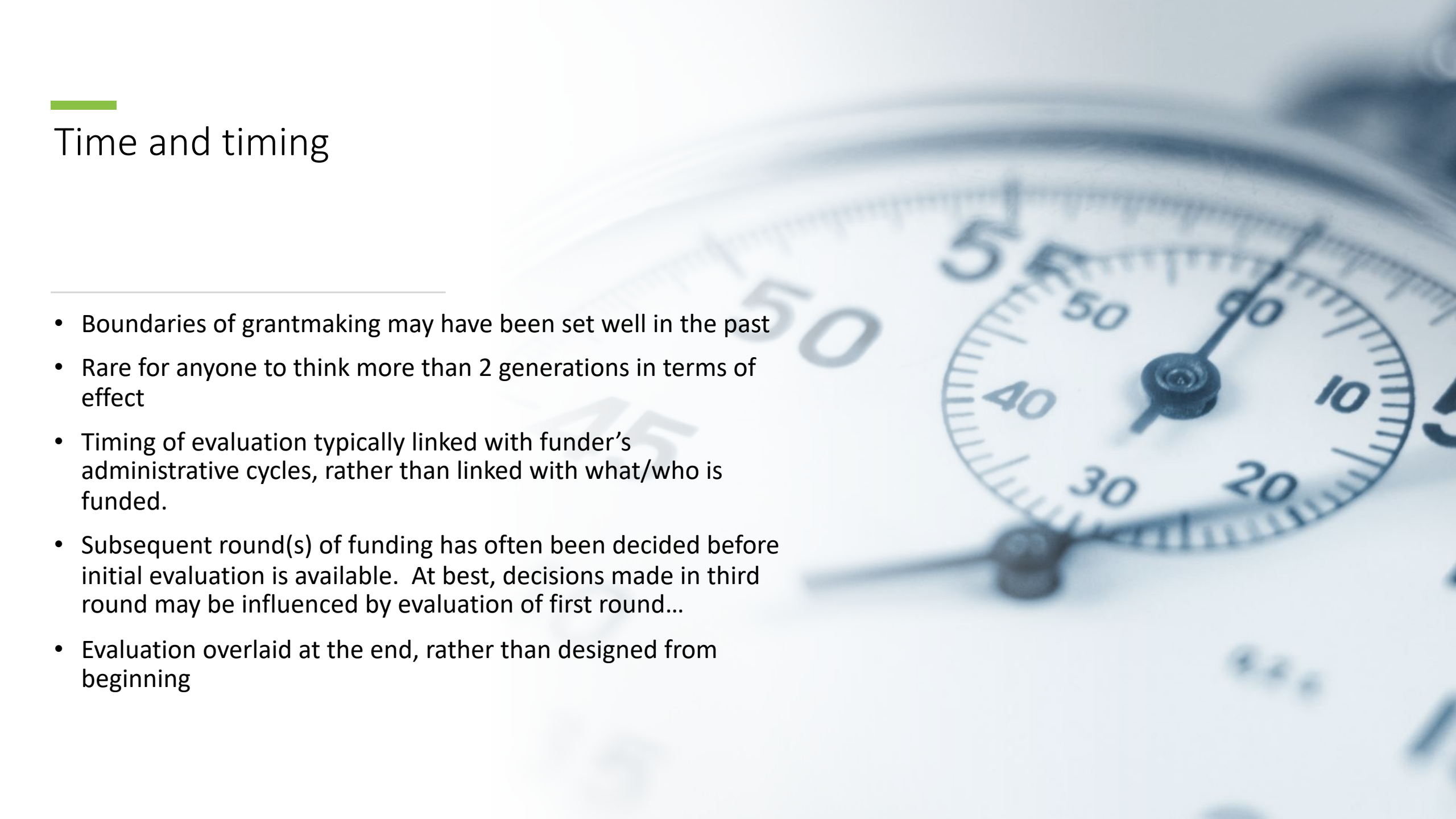
Entirely possible but very rare for individuals to undertake organised grantmaking (without some kind or organisation or structure)

Source of funds is very relevant to the *how, when, by whom and why* of grant evaluation

Who is evaluating the grant(s)?

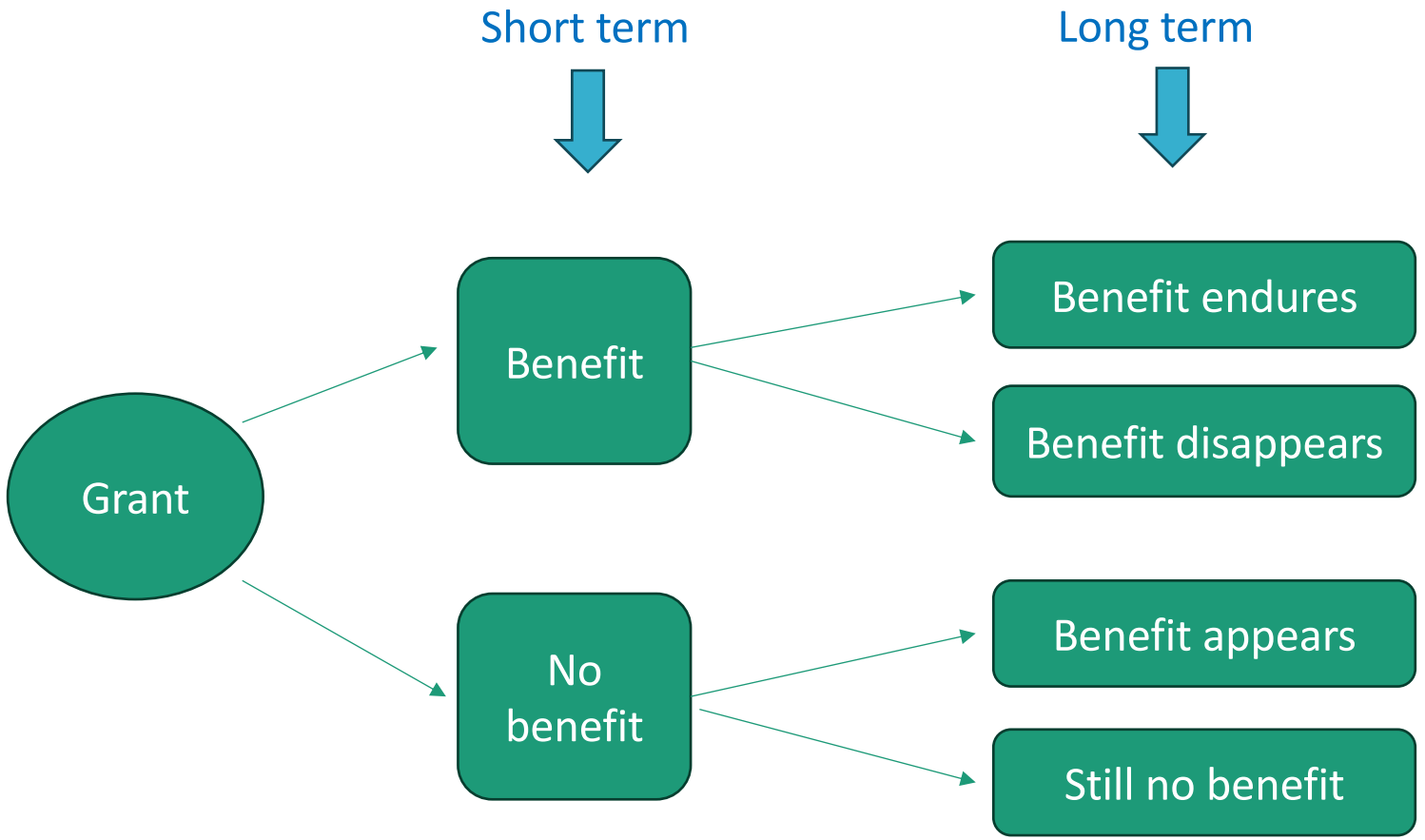
- Lenses and biases
- Informed by professional and lived experience
- Independence? Consultants/outside expertise? External evaluator?
- Use of software and technology
  - Who designed it? (their lenses and biases)
  - Degree of customisation possible by users
  - Skill of user, extent of use of its capacity
  - Coming soon: machine learning and AI technology for grant assessment
- Self-interest and self-promotion and survival?

Time and timing



- Boundaries of grantmaking may have been set well in the past
- Rare for anyone to think more than 2 generations in terms of effect
- Timing of evaluation typically linked with funder's administrative cycles, rather than linked with what/who is funded.
- Subsequent round(s) of funding has often been decided before initial evaluation is available. At best, decisions made in third round may be influenced by evaluation of first round…
- Evaluation overlaid at the end, rather than designed from beginning

"In the short-term, a grant may or may not be followed by a benefit;
in the longer term a benefit may endure, disappear, become apparent, or still not appear"
(p. 133)



Leat, D., Williamson, A., & Scaife, W. (2018). Grantmaking in a Disorderly World: The Limits of Rationalism. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 77(1), 128-135. doi: 10.1111/1467-8500.12249

Aspirational lenses on grantmaking evaluation

- It informs & therefore improves(?) future grantmaking decisions (the “better decisions” lens)
- It informs & therefore improves(?) future practice by the organisation/individual that received the grant (the “better practice” lens)
- It informs & therefore improves(?) future practice in the field for which the grant was made (the “greater capacity” lens)
- It allows for comparisons & benchmarking across geographies and time (the “benchmarking” lens)
- It aids sustainability & decreases dependency, beyond the term of the grant (the “survival” lens)

Governance lenses on grantmaking e valuation

Driven by audits, accountabilities, regulatory requirements, compliance focused (the “we must” lens)

Exposure of fraud, misconduct, misappropriation, use for other than designated (the “spotlight” lens)

Risk management and possible prevention of future problems (the “caution” lens)

Do no harm (the "safety" lens).

Less-acknowledged lenses on evaluation

- It’s the right thing to be seen to do (normative pressure, everyone’s doing it)
- It’s a form of control over others (time, resources, priorities)
- It’s restrictive/exclusionary rather than inclusive
- It frames what is defined as important and what is not
- It’s an industry that self-sustains
- It’s influenced by many other systems (software, employment, social media)

Actual use of evaluations

Continuity issues – if people have moved on, it's of less interest

Threat posed by findings/change and disruption is too great to be accepted

Communication of findings to time-poor audiences

External circumstances/environment may have changed so significantly that findings are irrelevant (e.g. Covid, change of government, new law/regulations)

Low or no generalisability of findings from one case/project/organisation to others

Scope and focus of grantmaking evaluation

- Cost is significant determinant, both dollars and time. Who pays? Who incurs cost?
- Who is commissioning evaluation? Who 'owns' the evaluation outputs/outcomes?
- Resources required (skills, networks, software, technology)
- Influenced/determined by pre-existing classification systems
- Done at the end, retrospectively
- Also process evaluations of grantmaking activities themselves

Evaluating grantmaking beyond dollars

Signalling value of grants, receivers are deemed ‘worthy’

Association between grantor and grantee, ‘dirty money’

Who didn’t get a grant? Evaluation of what happened to applications that were declined. (This is an enormous gap, a great gaping void…)

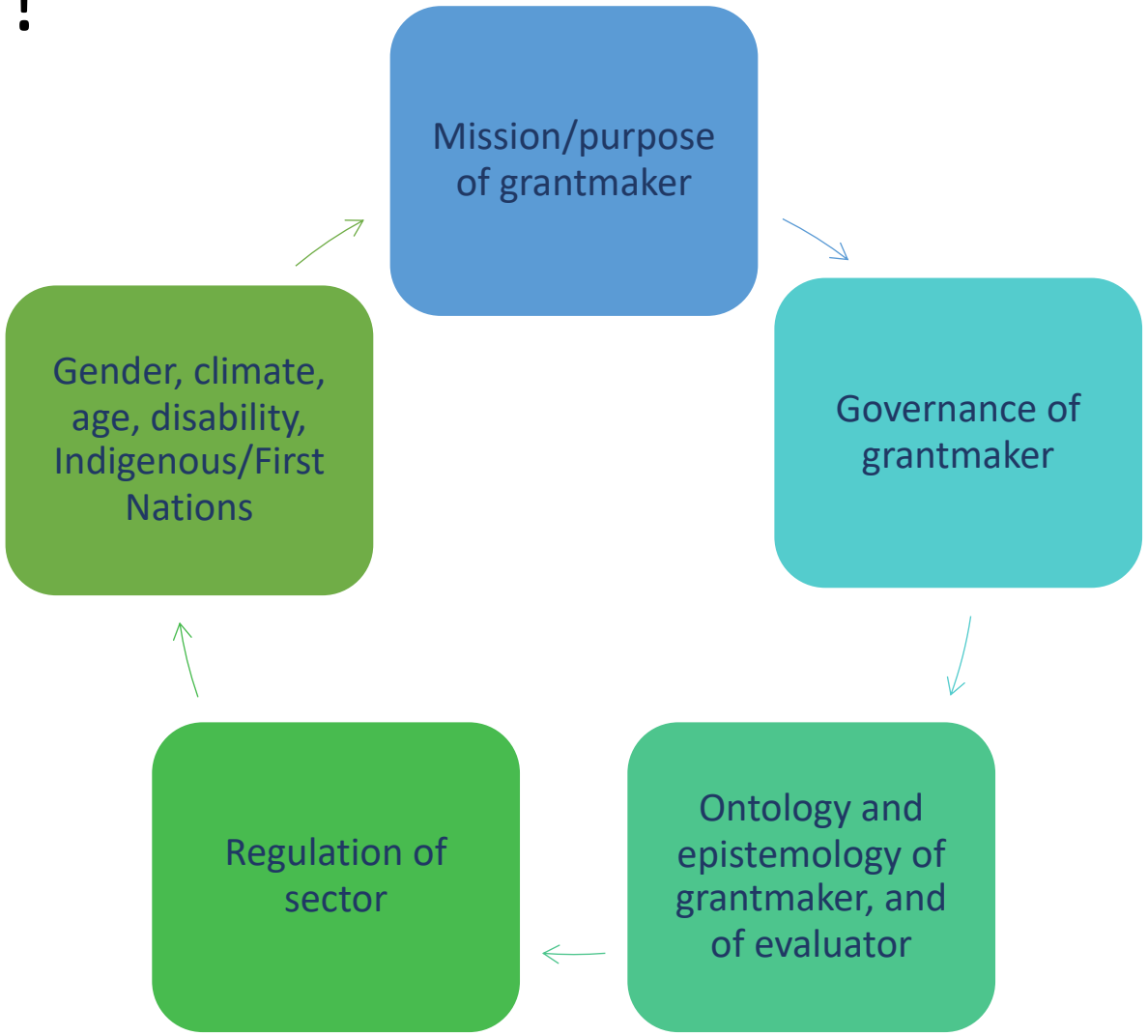
Missing voice of beneficiaries, not part of grantmaking process (but may be part of evaluation?)

Participatory grantmaking, through the lens of knowledges and who holds them, shares them.

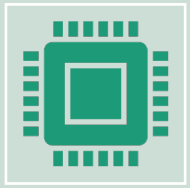
Evaluation at a program/portfolio level?

- Collectively evaluating outcomes/impact of what was funded. What were intentions/goals?
- Did we choose the right ones? Effectiveness of the choices made about what to fund (and what not to fund), opportunity costs & counterfactuals
- Evaluation of single grant for purposes/benefit of both grantor and grantee, but evaluation of a program of grants for purposes/benefit of grantor only
- Challenges around combining data re. different grant sizes, timing, duration, grantee types
- What level of portfolio? What is context?

Intersectional lenses on grantmaking and evaluation?



Role and place of software in grant evaluation



Is every grant mediated through some kind of software?

(even if only an Excel spreadsheet – everything must fit into a column)

Combination at this point in time of grantmaking, evaluation and software

Case Exemplar: SmartyGrants Outcome Engine

- A core challenge and requirement of grant managers is the evaluation of a portfolio of grants
- 60 grant managers are using SmartyGrant's newly released Outcome Engine.
- Does the Outcomes Engine help or hinder?

What is the Outcomes Engine?

- SmartyGrants is an Australian grants management software, launched in 2009.

- $7 plus billion in grants, 1.1 million applicants and more than 500 granting organisations.

- In 2022, SmartyGrants released a purpose-designed software module, named the **‘Outcomes Engine’** to enable and embed measurement of outputs and outcomes in grant programs.

The problem the Outcome Engine aimed to solve was this...

85% of respondents said they were satisfied with the program delivery.

Young people reported on average 45 points on the K10 test.

25 out of 50 participants experienced significant improvement in their understanding of financial information.

425 of respondents said they had improved their quality of life.

A policy was put in place to ensure gender-equity.

People told us that they found our event really good and they will come next year.

The outcomes of our program were significant.

Solution – the Outcomes Engine

Grantmakers/funders can **upload a standard list of outcomes** and associated metrics (indicators)

A set of a **pre-built form sections** to insert into forms templates (i.e. application and acquittal)

Section 2

Outcomes

Please tell us about the outcomes you expect to result from your project. Outcomes are the changes you expect to occur for the beneficiaries of your project. Generally outcomes can be framed as an increase or decrease in one or more of the following:

- Skills, knowledge, confidence, aspiration, motivation (these are generally immediate or short-term outcomes)
- Actions, behaviour, change in policy (these are generally intermediate or medium-term outcomes)
- Social, financial, environmental, physical conditions (these are generally long-term outcomes)

Immediate outcomes occur directly following an activity (e.g. within 1 month); medium-term outcomes are those that fall between the short and long-term outcomes (e.g. between 1 month and 2 years); and long-term outcomes are those we expect to see years later (e.g. 2, 5, 10 or 50 years after the activity).

Your outcomes	**Alignment with our outcomes**	**How does your intended outcome link to our outcomes?**
What changes do you expect will occur as a result of your project (e.g. Enhanced physical fitness)? Please be brief. One per row.	No more than 1 choice may be selected. Which of our outcomes will your project contribute to? If multiple apply pick the most relevant.	Please explain how your intended outcome helps contribute to ours.
Word count: **0 words**	Browse	Word count: **0 words**
Word count: **0 words**	Browse	Word count: **0 words**
Word count: **0 words**	Browse	Word count: **0 words**

Add More

Must be at least 1 rows

Default text, fully customisable

Default grid of questions, fully customisable

Section 2

Outcomes

Please tell us about the outcomes you expect to result from your project. Outcomes are the changes you expect to occur for the beneficiaries of your project. Generally outcomes can be framed as an increase or decrease in one or more of the following:

- Skills, knowledge, confidence, aspiration, motivation (these are generally immediate or short-term outcomes)
- Actions, behaviour, change in policy (these are generally intermediate or medium-term outcomes)
- Social, financial, environmental, physical conditions (these are generally long-term outcomes)

Immediate outcomes occur directly following an activity (e.g. within 1 month); medium-term outcomes are those that fall between the short and long-term outcomes (e.g. between 1 month and 2 years); and long-term outcomes are those we expect to see years later (e.g. 2, 5, 10 or 50 years after the activity).

Your outcomes	**Alignment with our outcomes**	**How does your intended outcome link to our outcomes?**
What changes do you expect will occur as a result of your project (e.g. Enhanced physical fitness)? Please be brief. One per row.	No more than 1 choice may be selected. Which of our outcomes will your project contribute to? If multiple apply pick the most relevant.	Please explain how your intended outcome helps contribute to ours.
Word count: **0 words**	Browse	Word count: **0 words**
Word count: **0 words**	Browse	Word count: **0 words**
Word count: **0 words**	Browse	Word count: **0 words**

Add More

Must be at least 1 rows

Default text, fully customisable

Default grid of questions, fully customisable

Section 2

Outcomes

Please tell us about the outcomes you expect to result from your project. Outcomes are the changes you expect to occur for the beneficiaries of your project. Generally outcomes can be framed as an increase or decrease in one or more of the following:

- Skills, knowledge, confidence, aspiration, motivation (these are generally immediate or short-term outcomes)
- Actions, behaviour, change in policy (these are generally intermediate or medium-term outcomes)
- Social, financial, environmental, physical conditions (these are generally long-term outcomes)

Immediate outcomes occur directly following an activity (e.g. within 1 month); medium-term outcomes are those that fall between the short and long-term outcomes (e.g. between 1 month and 2 years); and long-term outcomes are those we expect to see years later (e.g. 2, 5, 10 or 50 years after the activity).

Your outcomes	**Alignment with our outcomes**	**How does your intended outcome link to our outcomes?**
What changes do you expect will occur as a result of your project (e.g. Enhanced physical fitness)? Please be brief. One per row.	No more than 1 choice may be selected. Which of our outcomes will your project contribute to? If multiple apply pick the most relevant	Please explain how your intended outcome helps contribute to ours.
	*	
Word count: **0 words**		Word count: **0 words**
Word count: **0 words**		Word count: **0 words**
Word count: **0 words**		Word count: **0 words**

Arts and culture
- Increased participation in arts and culture

Community development
- Increased community engagement
- Improved accessibility of local services

Economic development
- Healthier local business sector
- Improved skills

Add More

Must be at least 1 rows

Section 3

Our metrics

A metric is a measurement designed to indicate whether or not progress towards an outcome is occurring, and quantify the extent to which it is occurring. Here we would like you tell us which of our quantitative metrics you may be able to report on.

Metric	Target	Collection method
No more than 1 choice may be selected. Which of our metrics (if any) will you track? You may be required to report on your progress. Add more rows if you want to list additional metrics.	Must be a number. Identify a target for the metric you have chosen - an estimated total for your project.	How will you collect and verify the data? E.g. survey, interviews/case studies, focus groups, administrative data (e.g. case management data), observation/estimation, government or public dataset (e.g. Census), other datasets.
Browse		Word count: **0 words**
Browse		Word count: **0 words**
Browse		Word count: **0 words**

Add More

Must be at least 1 rows

Section 3

Our metrics

A metric is a measurement designed to indicate whether or not progress towards an outcome is occurring, and quantify the extent to which it is occurring. Here we would like you tell us which of our quantitative metrics you may be able to report on.

Metric	Target	Collection method
No more than 1 choice may be selected. Which of our metrics (if any) will you track? You may be required to report on your progress. Add more rows if you want to list additional metrics.	Must be a number. Identify a target for the metric you have chosen - an estimated total for your project.	How will you collect and verify the data? E.g. survey, interviews/case studies, focus groups, administrative data (e.g. case management data), observation/estimation, government or public dataset (e.g. Census), other datasets.
Browse **Increased participation in arts and culture** Number of local artists supported as a result of Goodtown Council funding in 2019-20 Number of arts events, classes or festivals in Goodtown during summer 2020 Number of people who attended an arts event, class or festival run as a result of Goodtown funding in 2019-20 **Increased community engagement** **Healthier local business sector** **Improved skills**		Word count: **0 words**
Browse		Word count: **0 words**
		Word count: **0 words**

Add More

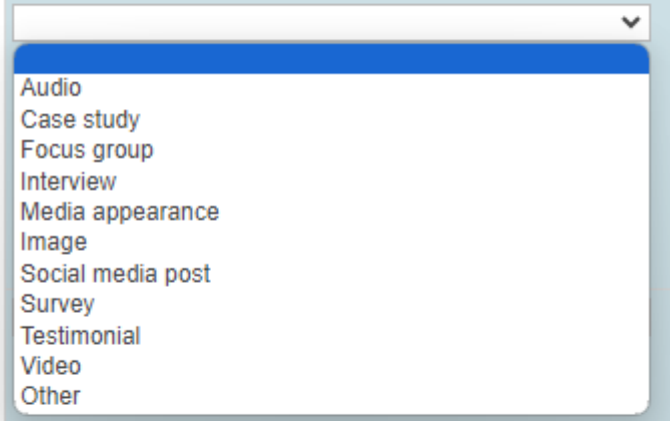
Must be at least 1 rows

Section 4

Qualitative evidence

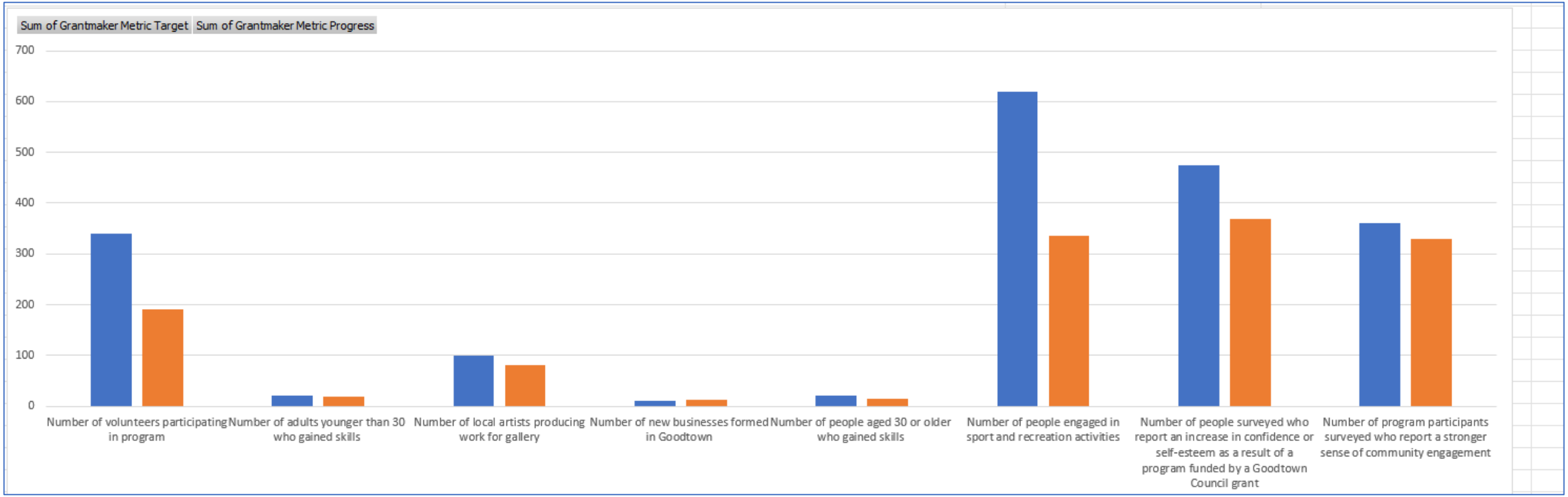
Qualitative evidence is a descriptive rather than numeric form of evidence designed to indicate whether or not progress towards an outcome is occurring.

Examples of qualitative data sources include interviews, testimonials, focus group transcripts/summaries, social media posts, media appearances/mentions, and artistic or multimedia depictions such as photographs, videos and audio/podcasts.

Qualitative evidence	What did you find?	Explanatory notes
Select the type of qualitative evidence you will use to help track your progress. One per row. Add more rows if you want to list additional types of qualitative evidence.	Here you can provide a description of your findings. For example, if you are referencing a focus group you might summarise your key conclusions; if you're reporting a case study provide that text here.	Add notes if you need to provide more context.
	Word count: **0 words**	Word count: **0 words**
	Word count: **0 words**	Word count: **0 words**
	Word count: **0 words**	Word count: **0 words**

Result – aggregated data across multiple grantees and grant programs

Row Labels	Target	Progress
Number of people commencing full-time employment	340	190
Number of people aged 30 or older who gained skills	20	18
Number of new businesses formed in Goodtown	100	80
Number of people engaged in daily physical activity	10	12
Number of people reporting reduced social isolation	20	15
Number of people volunteering	620	335
Number of people reporting an increase in confidence	360	330
Grand Total	**260**	**285**


Sum of Grantmaker Metric Target
Sum of Grantmaker Metric Progress
700
600
500
400
300
200
100
0
Number of volunteers participating in program
Number of adults younger than 30 who gained skills
Number of local artists producing work for gallery
Number of new businesses formed in Goodtown
Number of people aged 30 or older who gained skills
Number of people engaged in sport and recreation activities
Number of people surveyed who report an increase in confidence or self-esteem as a result of a program funded by a Goodtown Council grant
Number of program participants surveyed who report a stronger sense of community engagement

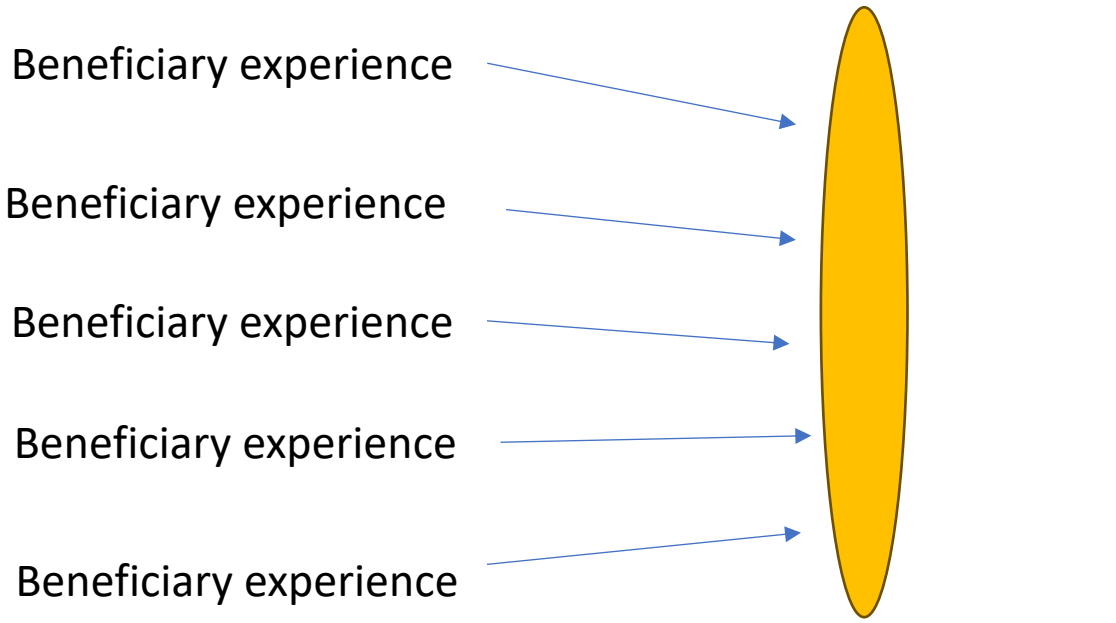
Early data on the use of the module reveals insights and challenges in relation to data collection, integration, and aggregation.

	Insights	**Challenges**
Data collection	The requirement of data collection leads to questions, conversations and reflections between the granter and grantee. Opportunities for capacity building.	Who is paying for the collection? Who is doing the collection? Often falls to the grantee/program manager to collect data, this can often lead to data quality issues.

	Insights	**Challenges**
Integration	How is outcomes collection integrated into grant applications and acquittals - What is proportionate and appropriate to ask and include in the form? A realisation by Grantmakers how far that $10,000 grant is going to go…	Capacity of grant teams including skills, knowledge and time to develop outcome frameworks/lists **that are appropriate**.

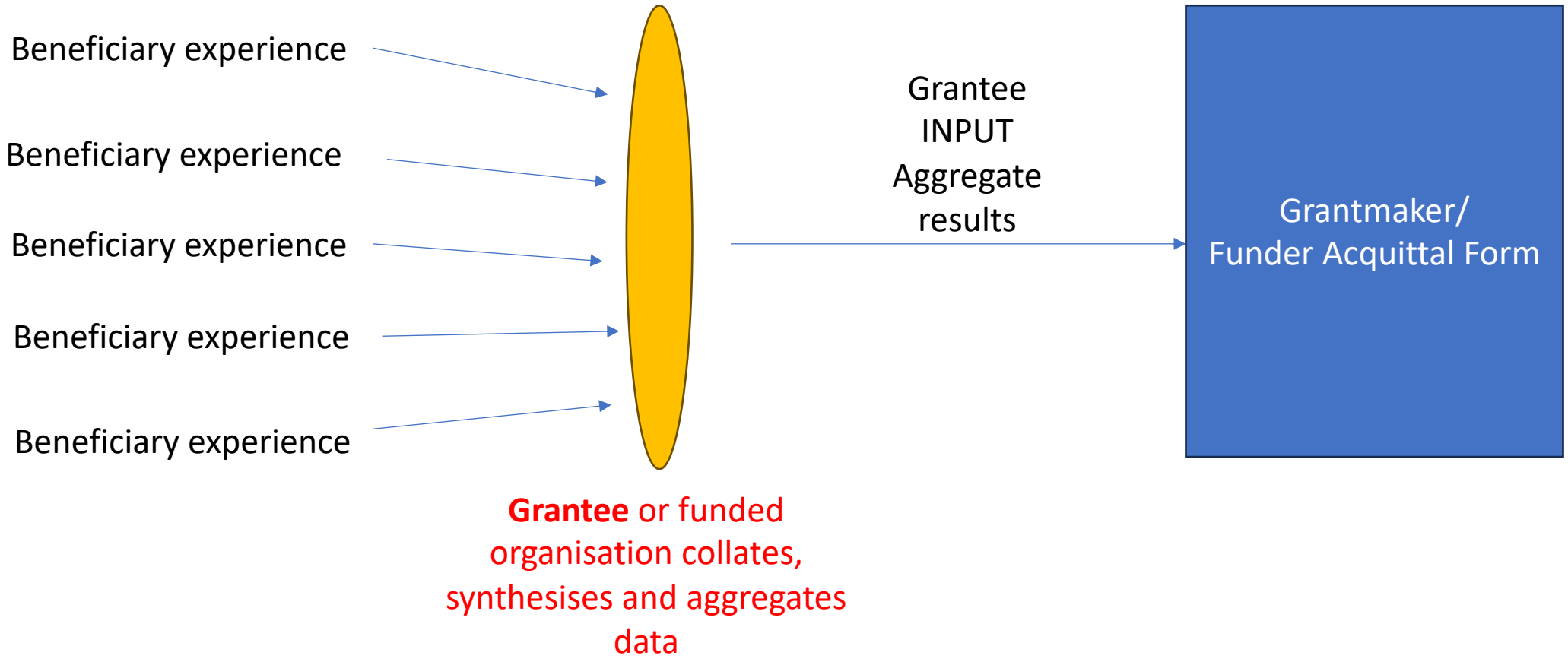
	Insights	Challenges
Aggregation	The data is being ‘refracted’ through SmartyGrants in the aggregation and input stage.	Bias in the data exacerbated by the power imbalance between the grantee-funder dynamic – selection bias, attribution bias, social desirability bias

The mediation of data through and to….

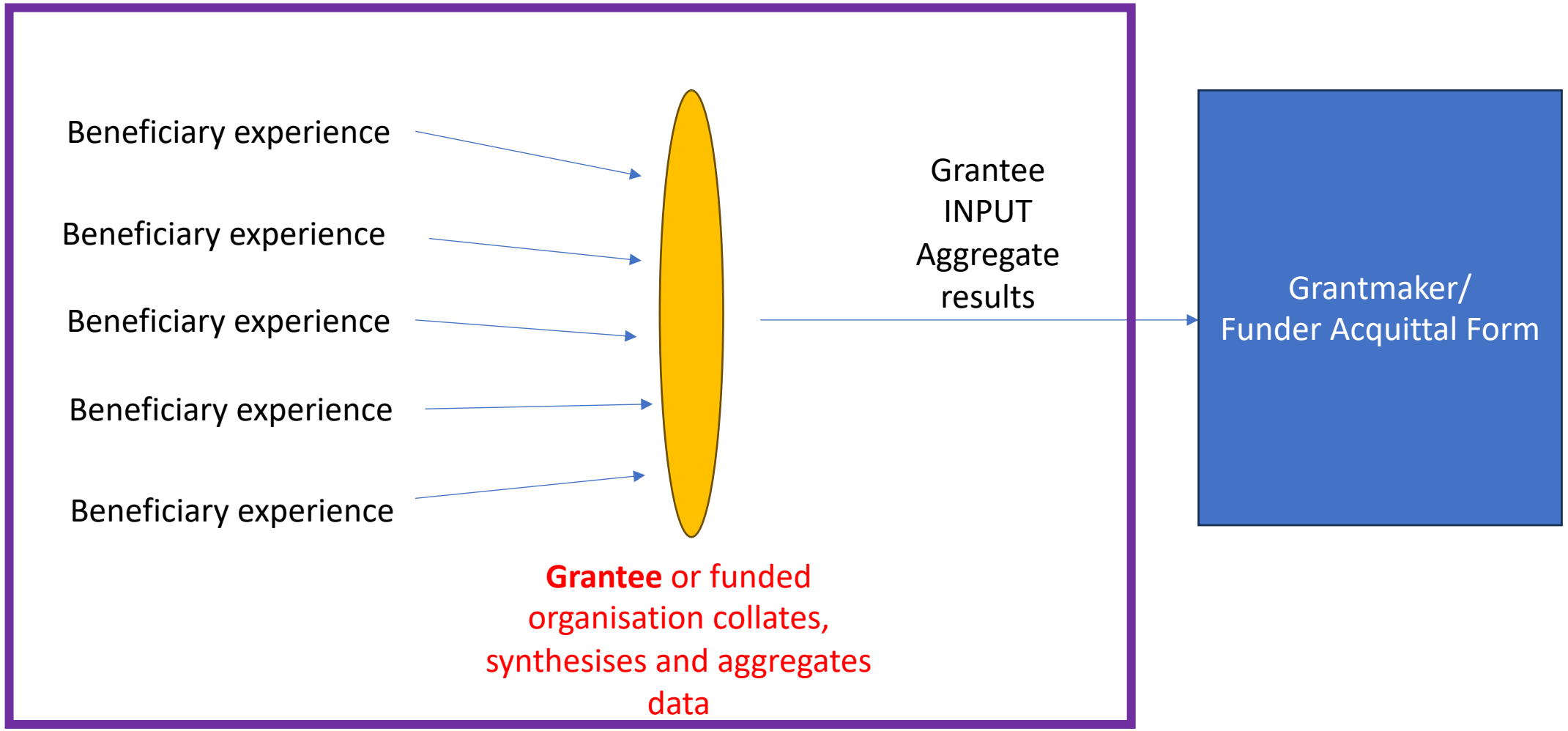


Grantee or funded organisation collates, synthesises and aggregates data

The mediation of data through and to….



The mediation of data through and to….



This and more questions are now being asked by grant-managers

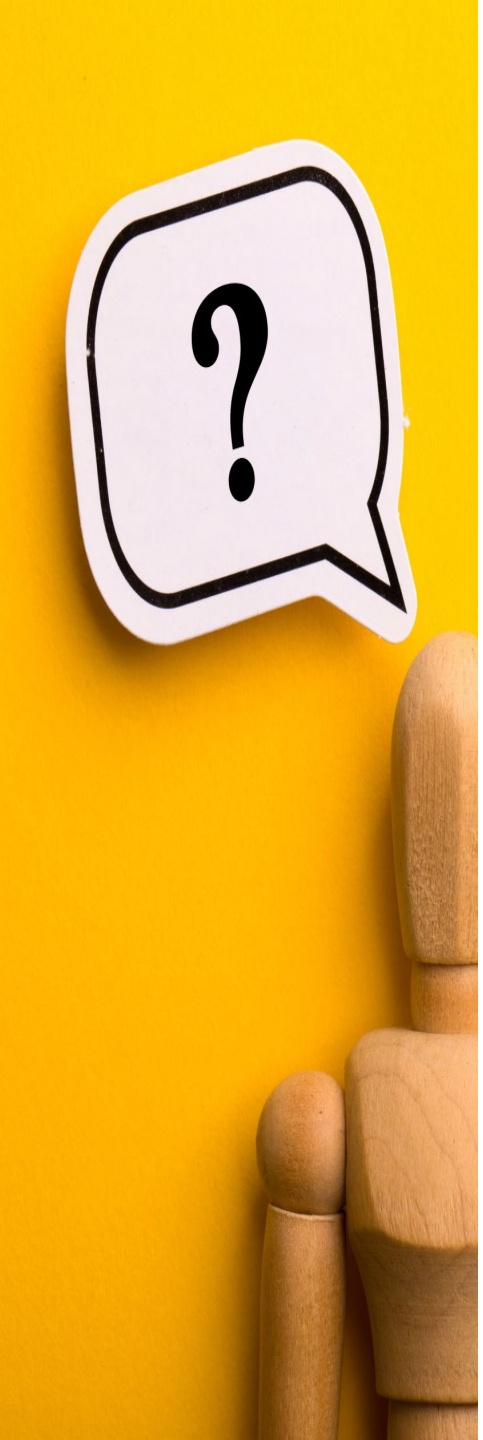
- What about our efficiency? Response times, cost ratios.
- What about our reach? Who? How far? Are the same organisations funded?
- Are we setting up dependencies?
- What does good investment mean?
- Is the aggregation of outcomes the sum of the parts?
- What more do we offer as a grant program? What is our theory of change?
- How do we sit in a broader system?

Critique

Jen has raised some interesting and important limitations of the Outcomes Engine, especially in relation to:

- A probable absence of beneficiaries in the dialogue with funders and grantees
- A filtering of experience (voice/culture … …) through the grantee to the grant marker and also through the software program itself

I’m going to explore this further and take a more critical look at the Outcomes Engine as an exemplar to see what’s missing and where we can go from here.



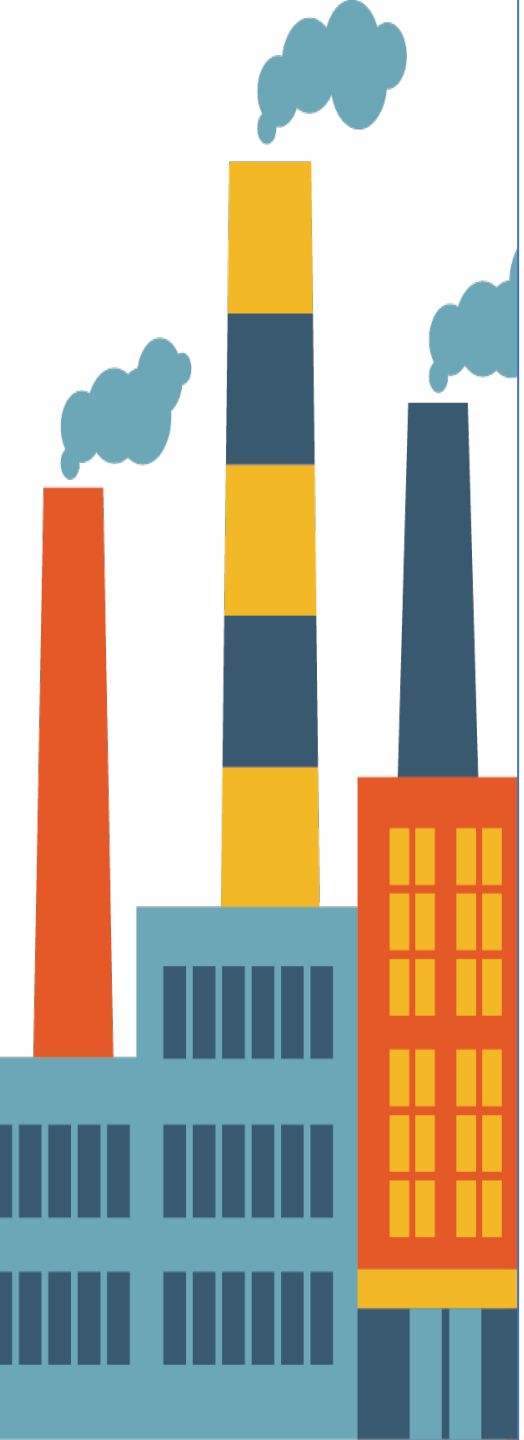
Who is it for?

Outcomes Engine and other evaluation platforms for grant management software, are useful tools. But for whom?

- Granters, Grantees, Management, Recipients of programs?
- Who sets the outcomes? Who owns the outcomes?
- Who is using the information? For what purposes?

- Whose voices are privileged, included, raised, and/or heard?
- How are voices mediated? (and what is the impact of this?)
- How does cultural competence/safety come into the discussion in these contexts?

(Mertens & Wilson, 2019)



What is it producing?

- Technocratic tools organise and reduce complex social and political realities into simplified, discrete, measurable components (Ebrahim, 2002)
- This creates a way of seeing (rational, managerial way), and occludes other ways of seeing.
- "*How management tools visualize matters*" (Martinez & Cooper, 2020)
- These tools are not neutral; they are productive.
- Outcome frameworks depoliticise and prioritise programs with measurable objectives, thereby affecting the focus and work of organisations (Martinez & Cooper, 2020)
- So, what is the risk?

Theories of change

- Pervasive in sector, frequently advocated as best practice
- Integration of Theories of Change into software
- Lens or frame, put in a box, determinist

But….some big challenges…

- Claiming outcomes of individual grants
- Claiming aggregated outcomes of a portfolio of grants
- Narratives around ownership of impact
- Inferred causation

What's missing?

- What if you can't measure (quantify) a program's outcomes?
- What if there are numerous logics or theories of change in a program?
- What if desired outcomes are:

  Emergent
  Nonlinear
  Complex
  Defined in collaboration

  Beyond the end of the grant period

- *How can these become reflected in evaluation platforms?*

What's missing?

FIGURE 7: PRINCIPLES SUPPORTING CULTURALLY SAFE EVALUATION

(Gollan & Stacey, 2021)

Adopting a wider lens

https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm

Therefore...

So, while outcome platforms have many uses, they can be problematised to question the things they miss, such as

- Power dynamics
- Socio-political effects
- Emergent outcomes
- Multi-stakeholder voice
- Non-linearity

Considering these elements helps to highlight the danger of evaluation platforms prioritising narrow outcomes …

… and instead encourages evaluative platforms that promote equitable, sustainable, and culturally safe choices….

… and awareness of what they are producing.

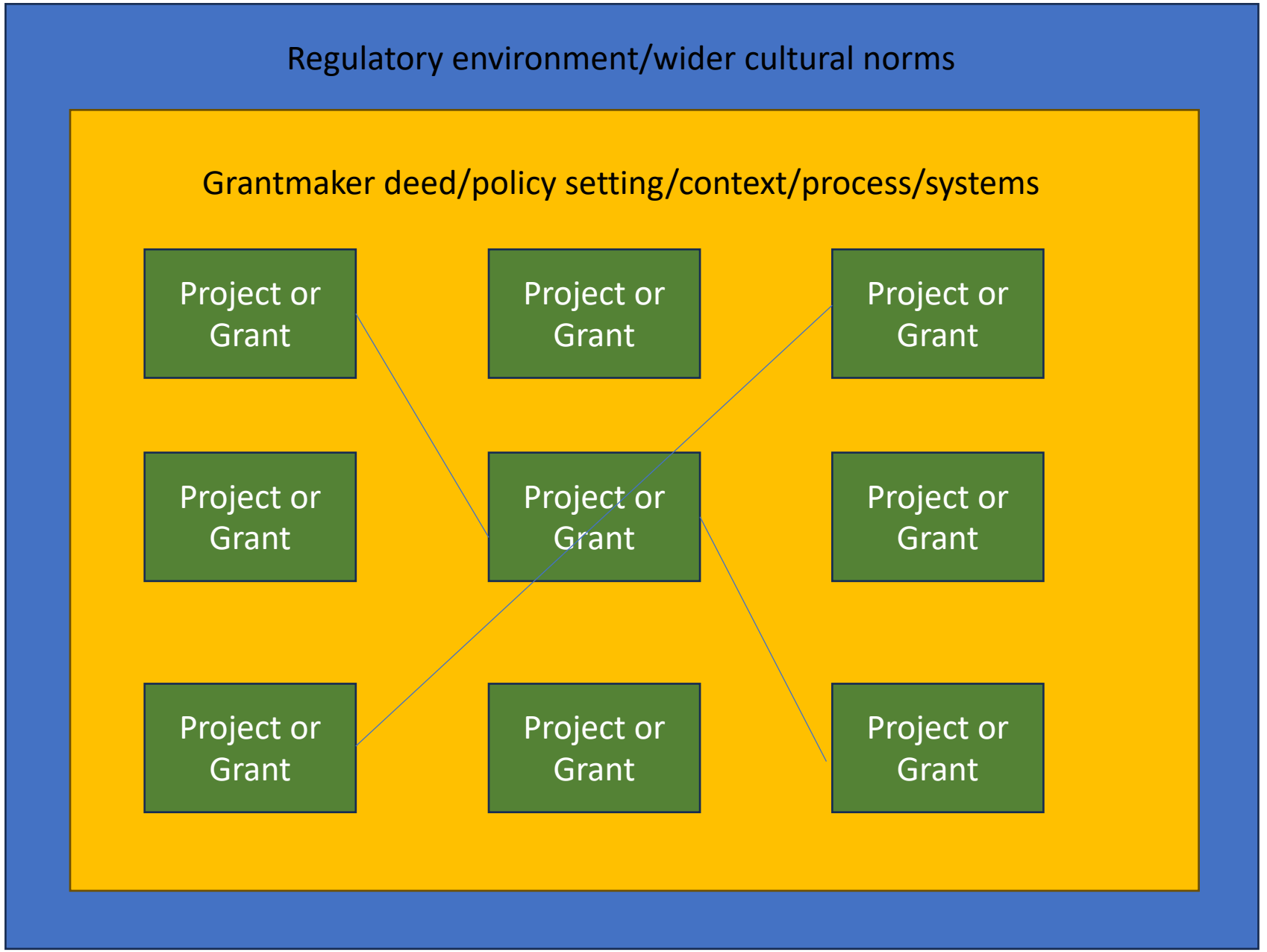
So...

- Electronic version of a dusty shelf
- "It's only a tool" - like an Excel spreadsheet
- What are we valuing? The power of form design.
- Does it create learning?
- Does it improve future decision-making by grant-makers?

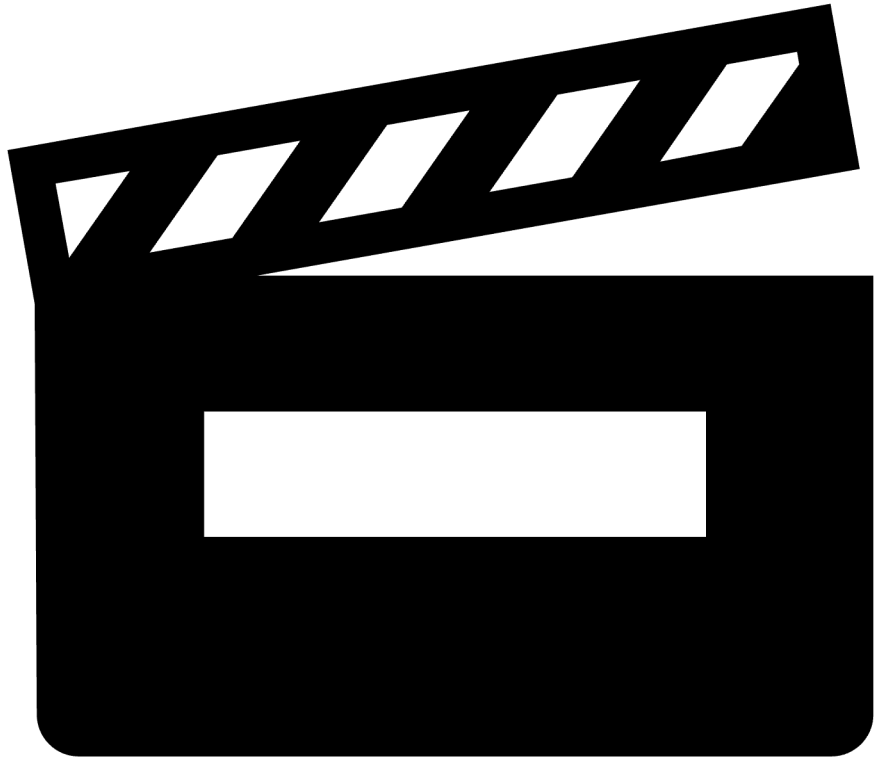
Single grant focused evaluation

Project or Grant

Portfolio Evaluation



Call to Action !



- Be more creative in the design of tools. Just because it's hard to design something that's not linear and numeric, doesn't mean we should give up.
- Push hard and continuously to improve inclusion, different voices
- Bring the OECD framework as a lens into the design of tools.
- What do we want an outcomes platform to become?

References

• Ebrahim, A. (2002). Information struggles: The role of information in the reproduction of NGO-funder relationships. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly, 31(1*), 84-114.

• Gollan, S. & Stacey, K. (2021). Australian Evaluation Society First Nations Cultural Safety Framework, *Australian Evaluation Society*, Melbourne.

• Kushner, S. (2016). The illogic of logic models. *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 16(1), 4-10.

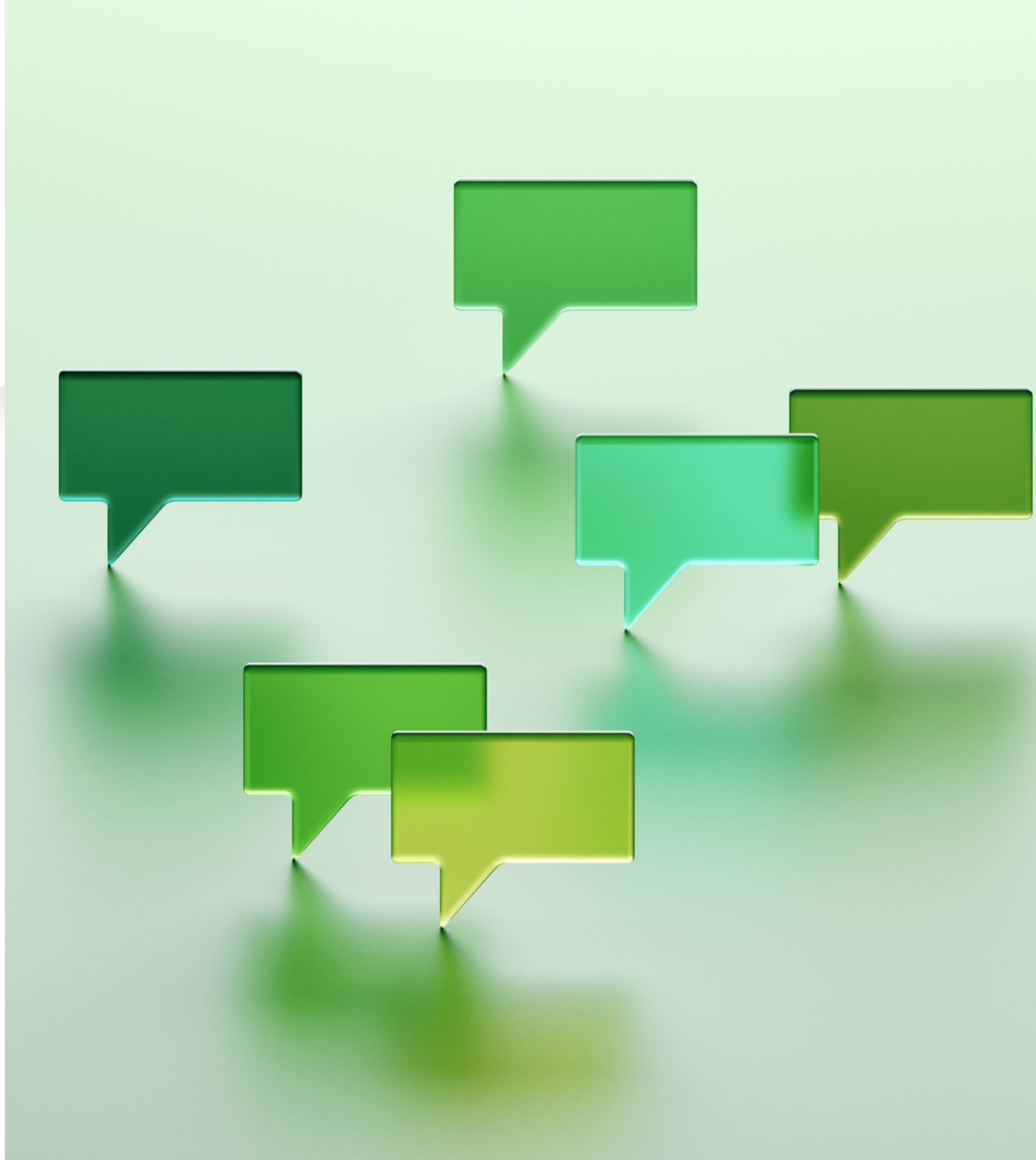
• Martinez, D. E., & Cooper, D. J. (2020). Seeing Through the Logical Framework. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 31(6), 1239-1253.

• Mertens, D. M., & Wilson, A. T. (2019). *Program evaluation theory and practice.* Guilford Publications

Thank you and Q&A

Connect with us and continue the conversation!

- https://www.linkedin.com/in/jennyriley1/
- https://www.linkedin.com/in/williamsonalexandra/
- https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-kylie-kingston-aa150292/



Other Software platforms

- **Purpose built GMS**
  - Submittable
  - Formly
  - Goodgrants
  - or custom-made bespoke products
- **General CRMs used for GM**
  - Salesforce
  - Microsoft Dynamics
- **Impact Measurement software**
  - SoPact
  - SocialSuite
  - True Impact
  - Brightest

Where to next….

- Inclusion of different voices.