

## [Reflection]

### **Measuring what matters.**

On February 27, I attended a 2-day Indigenous Evaluation Network summit in Ottawa. The summit opened with a pipe ceremony and a quote by Martin Luther King Jr., "It's always the right time to do the right thing" to emphasise the need to take immediate action against injustice regardless of whether it was convenient, or popular. It was a call to urgency. I left the summit reflecting on the evaluation methods we rely on and how often we default to metrics because they are easy for funders and boards to interpret, even when they fail to capture what matters most to communities. If evaluation is meant to measure what matters, then how do we quantify something like dignity or belonging?

The Indigenous Evaluation Network summit made it clear that Indigenous and Western approaches are often contrasted and placed in competition with one another. Western methodologies in particular have earned a reputation for being extractive, placing greater emphasis on what is measurable over what is meaningful. They often impose frameworks on communities instead of shaping evaluation around them. Part of this tension stems from what each approach is designed to do. Western evaluation frameworks often prioritize quantifiable indicators that allow funders and policymakers to measure progress across programs and populations. Indigenous evaluation approaches, on the other hand, emphasize relational accountability, lived experience, and knowledge systems grounded in culture, language, and community context. When these approaches are framed as competing methodologies, important insights are lost. The truth is that each captures different dimensions of impact and there should be room for both Western and Indigenous evaluation methods to coexist and be used in tandem. Together, they have the potential to yield stronger outcomes, by offering a more contextualized understanding, one that accounts for cultural and socio-economic nuances and can inform program outcomes and policy decisions better than numbers or stories alone could. Metrics, for instance, can reveal patterns, scale, and measurable outcomes, while stories and community knowledge can bring to light the context and lived realities behind the numbers. While these approaches are grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, the lessons they offer about context, relational accountability, and community leadership have implications beyond Indigenous communities. For example, many Black communities navigating systemic barriers face similar challenges when their experiences are reduced to indicators that fail to capture the realities of their daily lives. This reminds us that context matters. Incorporating evaluation approaches that include community knowledge, storytelling, and culturally grounded understandings can help us understand these realities in ways that conventional frameworks often miss. In this sense, conversations about evaluation are also conversations about whose knowledge counts.

These conversations also have implications for how philanthropy funds and evaluates community work. At Laidlaw Foundation, we have and continue to decolonize our granting and evaluation processes, thanks to a 2020 report by Andrea Johnston, the lead organizer of the summit. As a result of the report's recommendations, we have adapted our practices to include community-defined indicators of success, participatory evaluation, and funding models that prioritize relationships and long-term trust with communities. This shift has not meant abandoning metrics altogether. Instead, it broadened how we understand and measure impact. Through this transition, I saw firsthand how combining both Indigenous and Western approaches can enrich our relationships with communities, as well as our understanding of their needs. This in turn can better guide our decisions on how to support them through our programming and advocacy. Metrics continue to provide a broad picture of the issues and program outcomes, while stories add colour and depth to the canvas.

Presentations at the summit helped demystify Indigenous evaluation methods for us. Discussions explored what these approaches entail, what makes a good evaluator, and why these approaches matter for both shaping public policy and for supporting Indigenous communities. At its core, evaluation is a way to

determine if we have reached our objectives and used the right tools to achieve our desired outcome. While Western methodologies often rely heavily on quantitative indicators such as participation rates, or program completion, Indigenous evaluation incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and draws on cultural paradigms. Core principles include using community-led design, storytelling as data, and the recognition of language and ceremony as legitimate knowledge systems.

Most importantly, “evaluation must fit the community, not the reverse”.

For Indigenous communities, this principle is about more than just methodology. It is about self-determination. Evaluation has historically been conducted on Indigenous communities rather than with them, often extracting information without returning meaningful benefits. Indigenous evaluation methods then shift that dynamic by allowing communities to define what success looks like, how knowledge is gathered, and how findings are used to strengthen their own programs, priorities and cultural practices.

These principles also have important implications for public policy. Policymakers rely on data to inform decisions but often miss nuances that Indigenous methodologies can provide because they don’t know the communities, their challenges or their needs. While some needs like food and shelter can be quantified, others like dignity and belonging cannot be measured in conventional ways. Members of the community could need a warm bed and food for the day because many are facing homelessness. Some however, as stated by one of the panelists, may need something as simple as a hug because they have never received one before. These realities rarely appear in evaluation reports, yet they speak directly to the human conditions programs are meant to address. In this sense, a good evaluator, we were reminded at the summit, approaches the work with humility, understands their positionality, builds trust with knowledge holders, and allows the community to lead the process. The insights that emerge from these approaches can fill gaps in conventional Western evaluation practices, particularly in the systems that have historically disadvantaged Indigenous, Black, and racialized communities.

For those of us in philanthropy, this raises uncomfortable but necessary questions. What happens when our reporting templates constrain the story and narrow what counts as impact? What if timelines don’t align with community processes? What if success looks different than what we pre-defined? Are we funding outcomes or transformation? I learned of the concept of “knowledge gardening” at the summit, which captures the tensions between both approaches well. On the one hand, Western evaluation often seeks to measure the harvest, the outputs and outcomes at the end of a funding cycle. Indigenous evaluation on the other hand, reminds us to tend to the soil, to invest in relationships, trust, culture, and context. For philanthropy, this could mean shifting our methods from short-term measurement to long-term stewardship, which could look like offering multi-year funding, flexible reporting frameworks, community-defined indicators, and participatory evaluation with communities.

If we know that metrics alone cannot capture dignity, then “doing the right thing” might mean that we need to change how evidence is defined, collected, and used. Indigenous and Western methodologies then should not be seen as alternative approaches. Instead they are methods that work best together and offer something more complete (scope, story, breadth and belonging). For many communities navigating systemic inequities, including Black communities, evaluation approaches that recognize lived experiences and cultural knowledge can help illuminate forms of impact that conventional frameworks often overlook. Ultimately, if evaluation is meant to measure what matters, then we must be willing to broaden how we define evidence and whose knowledge counts. The question for all of us in evaluation then, is whether we are ready to embrace both methods and allow both to inform how we fund, measure and learn.

**Haiat Iman**

Research, Learning, and Evaluation Lead