



# Funders' Perspectives on Data Maturity of Social Purpose Organisations in India

Addendum to the State of the Sector Report

November 2025

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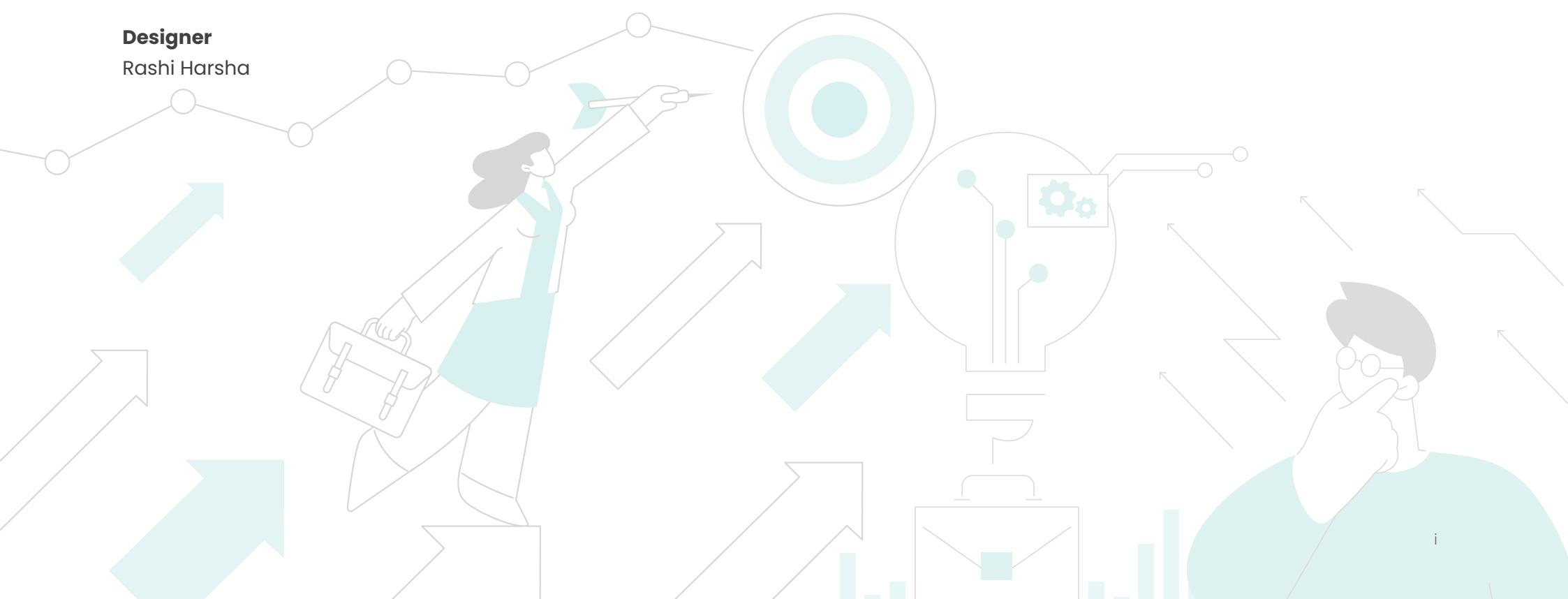
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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The ISDM CDSSI report, *State of the Sector: Data Maturity of Social Purpose Organisations in India*, released in August 2025, highlights funding as a key driver of data maturity in Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs). To explore this, CDSSI hosted a roundtable with funders to understand their perspectives on data-driven decision-making in the social sector in India. This report combines insights from the roundtable and the findings from the original report.



The report shows that data maturity is a sector-wide challenge that requires **collaboration, trust, and alignment** between funders, SPOs, governments, and communities.

## Why data maturity matters to funders

Funders highlighted that data plays a role beyond grant management. It helps assess program impact by answering critical evaluative questions—what is working, what isn't, and how programs should adapt. It drives continuous learning, and informs strategic decision-making for long-term direction.

However, it's important to understand this in a broader context:



The sector prioritises program and impact data, which means there is not enough emphasis on financial, operational, and HR data. This aligns with the *State of the Sector* report, which states that most organisations use data mainly for reporting, with limited application to operations or finance.



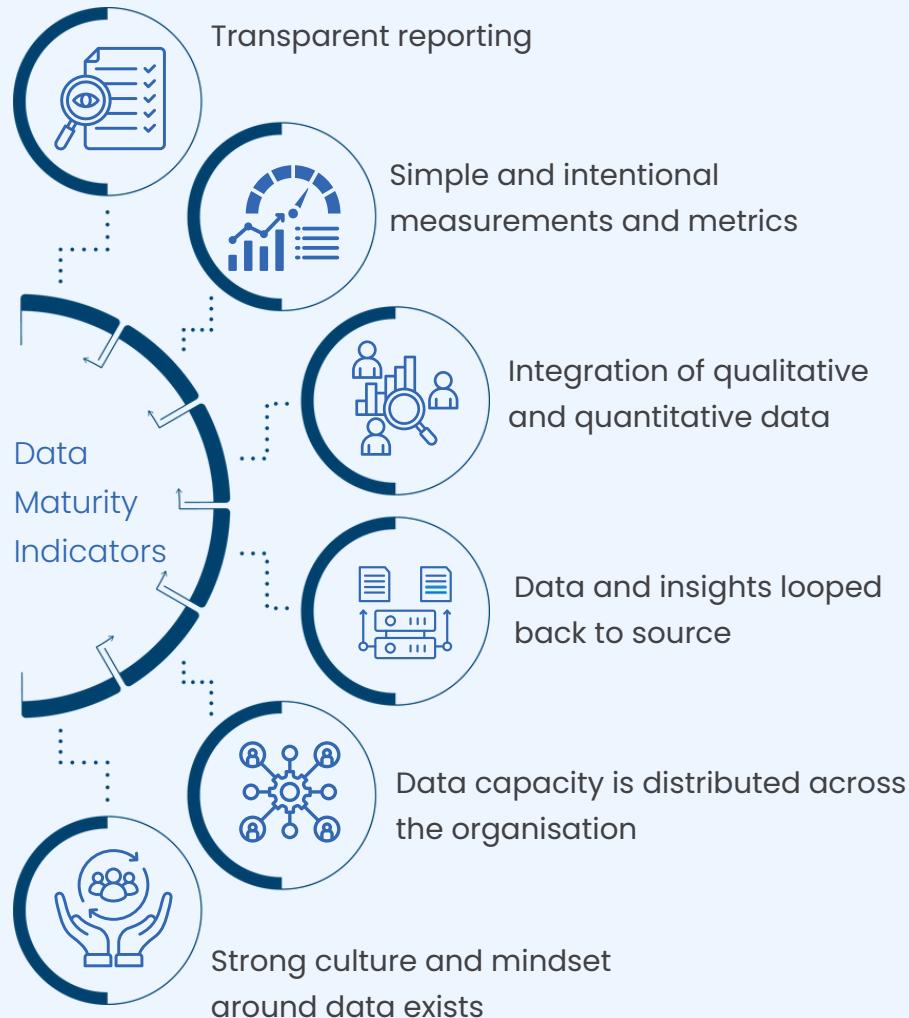
There is a strong focus among funders on compliance-driven, high-quality data, ensuring objectivity, third-party verification, and robust methodologies to maintain credibility and reliability.



Data maturity varies widely among funding organisations, just as it does among SPOs, reflecting differing data practices across the sector.

## Indicators of data maturity: a case for culture, capacity, and trust

Funders described various aspects that would indicate maturity in data-driven decision-making among their partner organisations:



- **Transparent reporting:** Many SPOs remain hesitant to share data beyond compliance outputs, often presenting only rosy pictures. Funders noted that data maturity means being able to report honestly, sharing both successes and challenges, and using feedback loops for learning and improvement.
- **Simple and intentional measurements and metrics:** Funders emphasised the importance of keeping metrics simple and intentional. Mature organisations are able to track outcomes through a few meaningful indicators rather than overwhelming staff with excessive data demands that risk fatigue or distorted reporting.
- **Integration of qualitative and quantitative data:** True data maturity comes when qualitative insights are integrated with quantitative metrics, capturing not just numbers but the depth and meaning of change.
- **Data capacity is distributed across the organisation:** The depth and breadth of data capacities within an organisation, and how evenly they are distributed across hierarchies, emerged as another key dimension of maturity. Funders stressed on the need for capacity building and simpler data collection platforms that use regional language to bridge this gap, alongside fostering an organisational culture that values and normalises data use at every level.
- **Data and insights looped back to source:** Data maturity means ensuring data does not just flow upward, but is also looped back to frontline staff and communities. Without this,

funders believe that data collection feels transactional and disconnected from those who generate it.

- **Strong culture and mindset around data exists:** Funders ranked culture and mindset as the most critical element of maturity—more important than even tools or systems. It means overcoming fear of data, building trust, and normalising honest, transparent reporting.

## Maturity shapes (but does not decide) funding choices

The level of data maturity among SPOs is important but may not entirely sway funding decisions—some funders are willing to work with organisations, offer support, and help build this capacity.



## Challenges to Data Maturity

### Over-reliance on numbers



Funders stressed the need to integrate qualitative insights, stories, and context to uncover lived experiences and real change. Without this, data risks becoming inaccessible or misleading for decision-makers.

### Misalignment among partners



Funders, SPOs, governments, and communities often read the same data differently. This misalignment makes it harder to build trust and collaborate effectively.

### Existing tools have limitations



Current measurement tools in the sector are often too basic, especially when it comes to capturing complex outcomes like changes in agency or empowerment, or measuring unintended effects of programs. Without better tools, it's hard to measure the full impact of programs.

### Missing frontline perspectives in impact reporting



Frontline workers often observe the most meaningful shifts in confidence, agency, and community dynamics, yet these insights rarely surface in reports. This gap is due to both, a lack of capacity among ground staff, and a systemic bias toward simplified metrics, which renders the deeper impact invisible to decision-makers.

## Looking Ahead

- **Seeing funders as collaborators and enablers, not just resource providers:** Funders see themselves not just as resource providers, but as collaborators, providing staff, resources, and support to help SPOs overcome capacity gaps, reduce fear of reporting, and use data for learning and course correction.
- **Encouraging leadership to have grassroots context:** Data makes sense only when leaders engage directly with ground realities. Without this engagement, the context of the data is often lost.



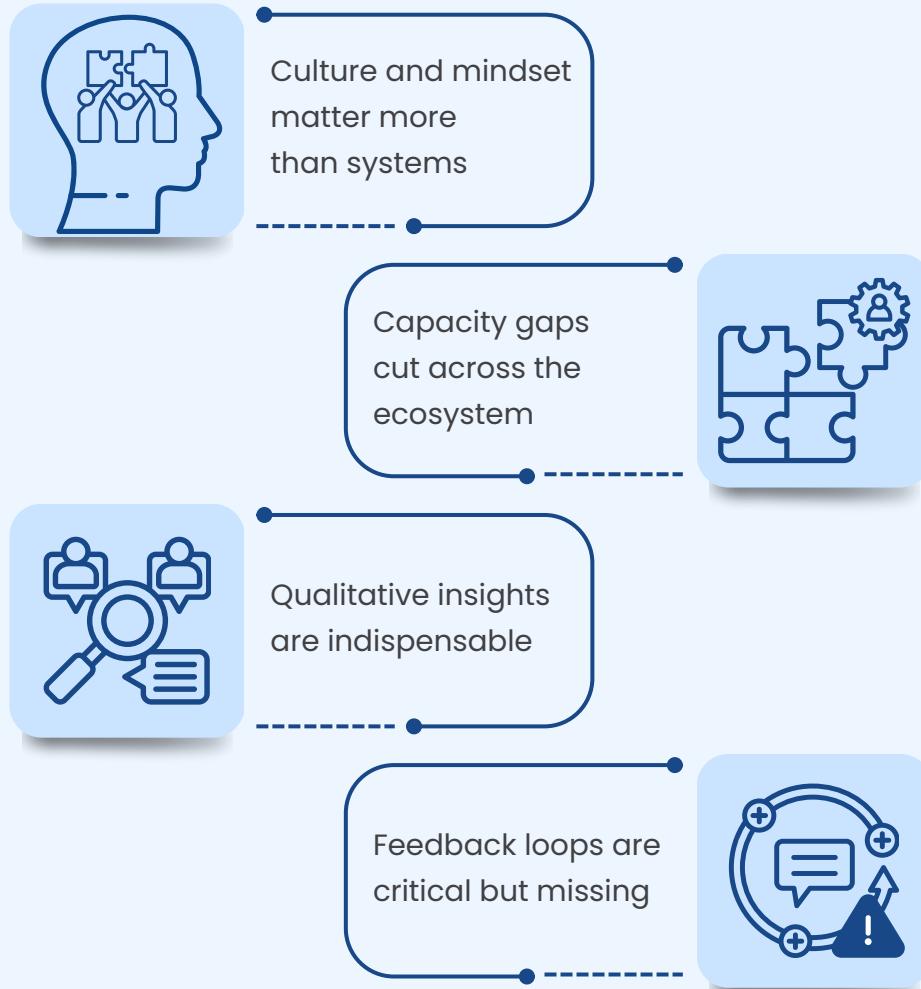
- **Co-creating metrics:** By co-creating metrics and evaluation frameworks together with grantees, funders can align expectations, improve data quality, and foster shared ownership of results.



- **Learning from each other:** Both funders and SPOs benefit from spaces where they can exchange practices, indicators, and lessons. This transforms data maturity from an individual challenge to a shared journey for all ecosystem stakeholders.
- **Sharing data across organisations:** Responsible data-sharing within thematic cohorts reduces duplication, aligns outcomes, and strengthens sector-wide understanding through common indicators.

## Conclusion

The roundtable reinforced the *State of the Sector* report's findings:



Funders echoed these themes while adding nuance from their vantage point. They highlighted how fear of reporting failures distorts data practices, how frontline voices and lived experiences are excluded from formal reports, and how misalignment among stakeholders undermines trust and collaboration.

Data maturity, therefore, is not a technical milestone but a cultural shift. It requires balancing quantitative rigour with qualitative insights, focuses on building trust across partners, and aligning expectations amongst them to reduce reporting burdens. At its core, it is an ecosystem challenge: funders, SPOs, governments, and communities all shape one another's practices. Without trust and collaboration, data practices are little more than a compliance tool. But when the ecosystem works together, data can become a shared asset for learning and adaptation.

The Data Maturity Assessment (DMA) framework offers a useful diagnostic for the sector to grow its overall data maturity, but it must be applied as a tool for growth, not as another qualifier. Ultimately, the sector must focus on how SPOs can grow in their data practices and how funders can enable this growth to create a more collaborative ecosystem.

# Introduction

A key insight from the *State of the Sector: A Report on the Data Maturity of Social Purpose Organisations in India* was that **funding is a key driver of data maturity** among Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs). To unpack this insight, CDSSI held a roundtable discussion with funders, to get their perspective on data-driven decision-making in the social sector in India.

While the report covered perspectives of the SPOs engaged in program delivery, the roundtable captured the perspectives of a diverse mix of funders—domestic and international Corporate Social Responsibility (CSRs), family foundations, philanthropic investors, outcome-based funders, and thought leaders—on data maturity. The insights presented here situate data maturity as an ecosystem-wide issue that demands

alignment, trust, and collaboration across all stakeholders. Together with the findings of the *State of the Sector* report, they provide a richer understanding of opportunities, tensions and pathways in advancing data maturity in the sector.

## Limitations

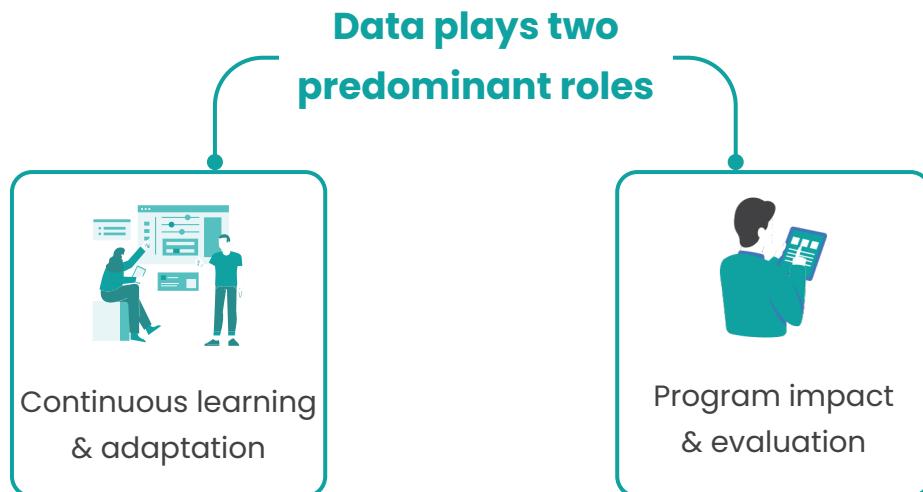
The insights in this report are limited to the funders who agreed to participate in the roundtable and engaged in conversations with us. The participants have varied experiences across multiple organisations, and so, their perspectives were not limited to their current position. The views expressed at the roundtable were the participants' individual views, and do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the organisations they currently represent.



# Discussion Highlights

## 1. Why data maturity matters to funders

At the roundtable, funders from CSRs, philanthropies, foundations and those working with outcome-based models shared that data plays two predominant roles in their work. One is that it supports continuous learning and adaptation within interventions, allowing for program planning and strategic decision-making about long-term direction. The other is that it helps them understand program impact by enabling them to ask critical evaluative questions—what is working, what is not, and how programs should adapt. For CSRs, especially, data helps inform resource allocation, improve efficiencies in the grant management system, and enable meaningful collaboration.



While this framing is positive, it is crucial to understand a few key points in relation to this:

First, the discussion demonstrated that although the sector recognises the value of all kinds of data, there is a predominant focus on impact data. This means that other types of organisational data—such as financial data or operations data or human resources (HR) data—are often undervalued, even though this type of administrative data is important for organisational health and long-term sustainability. This is similar to the insight presented in the *State of the Sector report*. Most organisations use data primarily for reporting and monitoring, while only a few consider its application in operations, human resource management, or finance. This also came through in a brief prioritisation exercise that a few funders at the roundtable participated in, where HR management was ranked as the least important element in a data-mature organisation.



Second, a key insight from the roundtable was that funders want data—whether related to compliance, or for learning and strategic decision-making—to be of high quality. It must be objective, third-party verified, and generated using robust methodologies. Ultimately the credibility and reliability of impact data is paramount.



Lastly, funding organisations themselves, just like SPOs, are on a spectrum of data maturity and can vary widely in terms of their own data practices. At the roundtable, some donors shared how they were deepening evaluative thinking within their organisations to improve how they partner with their grantees. Another had outsourced their entire Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) function, and yet another was just now streamlining their data by moving from paper and independent Excel sheets to a unified digital system. Overall, maturity can be higher or lower depending on where the funder is in their journey. Future investigations should explore how a funder's beliefs about data maturity influences both their internal data practices and their work with their grantees.

## 2. Indicators of data maturity: a case for culture, capacity, and trust

In unpacking the meaning of data-driven decision-making, funders discussed themes connected to data maturity in their partner organisations. Some of these were:

### Transparent reporting

Roundtable participants highlighted that many organisations fear reporting impact data. For instance, one funder shared that their grantee organisation was reluctant to share a particular metric year-on-year. Another stated that an ask for more data led to a crisis of trust with a partner organisation. A third funder expressed concern that SPOs often present only positive impact and growth data.

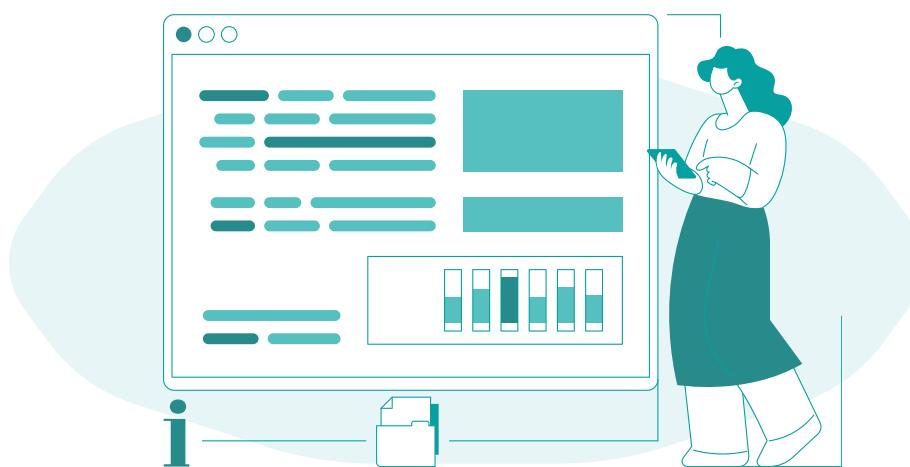


"People are scared to even discuss data, even if they have good quantitative skills, and understand that data is just being collected to course correct. Things have changed a little today, but the default belief among SPOs is that they should show a rosy picture," said a funder representing a family foundation.

An outcome-based funder added: "Often, SPOs are scared to show us their data. What really matters to us is what the data says about the process. We want to use insights from the data to drive innovation, course correct, and ensure effective delivery. If we encounter failure, we want to ask ourselves: what are we learning from it?"

### Simple and intentional measurements and metrics

Funders want reporting metrics to be selected intentionally, based on their relevance. For them, this is a key element of data maturity.



"It is important not to get too overwhelmed by metrics. Even three metrics are enough if they tell you something important that you can learn from," said a funder representing a family foundation.

Some funders even hinted at how demanding large amounts of data will put unnecessary pressure on frontline teams, and create perverse incentives for fudging data and finding loopholes. Ultimately, funders stressed the importance of keeping metrics simple, reiterating that only relevant data is needed for data-driven decision-making.

The roundtable also highlighted two approaches to data use in the sector. One, is to focus on a 'north star' metric—such as learning outcomes—that guides long-term direction without getting entangled in every detail of how results are achieved. This is especially relevant in systems change, where outcomes are difficult to replicate and even small shifts at the ground level can alter results significantly. The other approach, more common in the for-profit sector, is to measure everything that matters. This approach generates granular insights, but comes at a high cost in terms of time, money, and effort. Participants pointed out that both funding organisations and SPOs must carefully weigh these trade-offs: deciding not just what can be measured, but what is worth measuring given its relevance to the ultimate outcome.

### Integration of qualitative and quantitative data

Participants repeatedly underscored the need to value qualitative data alongside quantitative metrics. They also stated that, for data-mature organisations, the qualitative data

gathered should also be meaningful, and used to infer insights about the degree of change on the ground. Many funders recognised the power of qualitative data to improve decision-making, and highlighted the need to integrate it into current data practices.



### Data capacity distributed across the organisation

Funders recognise that data capacity within an organisation is a driver of data maturity, while also noting that it is a major gap across the sector. In their experience, funders found that often Monitoring and Evaluation teams, leadership or fundraising teams are comfortable handling data, while frontline staff or program managers lack data capacities. This creates hierarchies around data use, and limits the organisation's potential for learning from data. From these conversations, a more nuanced understanding of data capacity as a key dimension of data maturity emerged, highlighting that the depth and breadth of data capacities

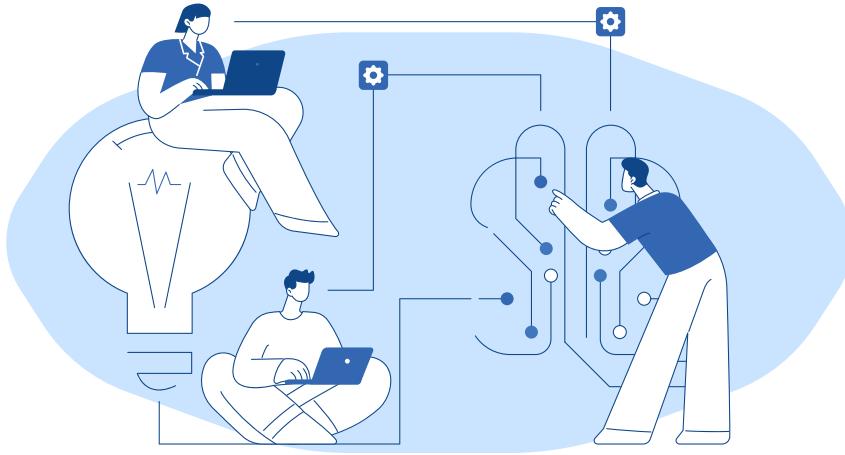
within an organisation, and the distribution across roles were key levers for greater data maturity.



The *State of the Sector* report mirrors this sentiment. There are stark capacity gaps—less than half of SPOs have skilled staff for data use, and training is sporadic. The roundtable participants therefore stressed the need for capacity-building and simpler data collection platforms that use regional languages to bridge this gap. They also believe that fostering an organisational culture that values and normalises data use at every level will help bridge this gap.

### Data and insights looped back to source

To be data mature, an organisation must ensure that data doesn't just flow upward but also circulates back down to the people who collected it. Right now, this rarely happens. For example, frontline workers, such as teachers in government schools, often submit data without understanding why it is needed or how it will be used. This disconnect breeds frustration and fatigue, and undermines trust between SPOs and communities.



A truly mature approach to data means that those who generate the data are also empowered by it. When frontline staff understand the purpose of the data they collect, they can see its impact on decisions and use the insights to improve their own work. It creates a cycle where data becomes a tool for improvement rather than just a reporting requirement. This aligns with a recommendation from the *State of the Sector* report that organisations should adopt more inclusive and participatory data practices.

### Strong culture and mindset around data exists

Participants emphasised that maturity is not simply about having more systems, dashboards, or indicators, but is linked to the idea of data integrity and quality. It is about being honest and transparent at every stage of the data lifecycle—from how data is collected in the field, to how it is analysed, and finally how it is used for decision-making.

When participants were asked to rank the six dimensions of data maturity in order of importance, almost all respondents picked culture and mindset<sup>1</sup> as the first priority. The *State of the Sector* report also highlights that data maturity is not just about technology, but about building a data-informed organisational culture where leadership champions data use, and staff is trained accordingly. In addition, the report makes a case for building a strong data culture. The roundtable participants highlighted similar themes—fear of data within SPOs, data hierarchies, and the need for leadership to break silos and normalise honest, transparent use—all relating to a shift in data-related culture and mindsets.



However, the second priority was less clear. Opinions were split between data training and capacity-building, project data analysis and visualisation, and project data collection and

<sup>1</sup>. [The State of the Sector report](#) identifies six dimensions of data maturity. These are (1) Data training and capacity building; (2) Project data analysis and visualisation; (3) Project data collection and monitoring; (4) Data storage and accessibility; (5) Human resource data management; (6) Culture and mindset promoting data-driven decision-making.

monitoring. Interestingly, a preliminary review shows that there are two groups among participants. One group gave more importance to people's ability to work with data (i.e. their data training), while the other considered it more important for organisations to have systems to capture data effectively (i.e. monitor data). While the sample here is too small to draw conclusions, it is worth investigating with a larger set of funders if a preference for either would impact the way they support their grantees' data maturity journey.

### **3. Maturity shapes (but does not decide) funding choices**

The roundtable discussion highlighted that many factors determine decisions relating to funding, not just data maturity. The level of data maturity among SPOs is important, but may not entirely sway funding decisions—some funders are even willing to work with organisations, offer support, and help build this capacity.

During the roundtable discussion, funders were asked to respond with decisions they would make in certain circumstances. Suppose an SPO they have funded for five years fails to track outcomes despite support. Their community impact is visible, but the data is weak. Would they exit? Why or why not?

Some of the responses were:

“ It is my failure as well. I will build the capacity of the SPO and 1-2 youth before I exit. ”

“ (I will) exit, if (despite) repeated feedback, (it is not acknowledged). ”

“ Maybe, (but it is) important to understand the reasons for failure. ”

“ I will not exit. I will work to build their data and impact measurement. ”

# Challenges to Data Maturity

At the roundtable, funders from CSR entities, philanthropies, foundations and those working with outcome-based models shared that data plays two predominant roles in their work. One is that it supports continuous learning and adaptation within interventions, allowing for program planning and strategic decision-making about long-term direction. The other is that it helps them understand program impact by enabling them to ask critical evaluative questions—what is working, what is not, and how programs should adapt. For CSRs, especially, data helps inform resource allocation, improve efficiencies in the grant management system, and enable meaningful collaboration.

## Over-reliance on numbers



Funders recognise that data is more than numbers, it also includes lived experiences, stories, and observations. This qualitative insight is the context that gives data its true value. But much of the data produced in the sector is either too technical or inaccessible for decision-makers. Numbers on their own—whether peer-reviewed statistics or accurate compliance figures—often fail to capture the complexity of real-world situations. Enriching data with lived experiences, narratives, and qualitative insights ensures that numbers are

interpreted accurately and lead to decisions that reflect ground realities. This itself can be a marker of data quality, that need not be defined by peer review alone but by whether data is relevant, contextual, and usable for those who need it. The roundtable agreed that this was missing in the sector. This came through in the *State of the Sector* report as well. It is important to integrate qualitative insights, storytelling, and participatory practices into data use, so that data is relevant and usable.

## Missing frontline perspectives in impact reporting



The roundtable discussion highlighted a key concern—the richness of change observed by frontline workers rarely makes its way into reports and back to decision-makers. While staff on the ground witness how the community grows in confidence and agency, these insights are often reduced to basic headcounts or output numbers in formal reporting. As a result, the depth of impact—what actually changes in people's lives—remains invisible in the data that decision-makers see. Recognising and capturing these frontline perspectives is essential to achieving true data maturity. This was also linked to the lack of capacity in ground staff in the discussion, and reflects the over-reliance on qualitative data in reporting.

## Misalignment among partners



Data can often mean different things to different stakeholders, resulting in inconsistencies in use and interpretation. This is a key challenge many funders faced firsthand. One funder cited the example of a maternal and infant health project in

Uttar Pradesh (UP). At the outset, data from the community health centre suggested that the high-risk pregnancy rate was just 0.03%. But after a year of work, the actual figure was found to be 37%. By aligning data and linking it to policy conversations, the project team was able to correct reporting gaps. Current monitoring now reflects a rate of 15%—a significant improvement. Without having a shared understanding of what data represents, organisations and their partners—funders, community, government administrators—risk talking past one another, making collaboration and aligning on strategy far more difficult.

## Existing tools have limitations



In many ways, the roundtable discussed gaps within current measurement tools and systems. One gap is that current tools are often unable to capture deeper dimensions such as agency, empowerment, or lived experience resulting from interventions. Another is that they are unable to capture the unintended effects of their interventions. A third gap, specific to funders, is that measurement approaches across different thematic areas are not similar/ consistent. These gaps highlight the need for more nuanced, consistent, and holistic measurement approaches to truly capture the breadth and depth of impact.

# Looking Ahead

Notably, many funders at the roundtable showed empathy for the challenges faced by grantees in data collection, management and impact reporting. Recognising the limitations and struggles of non-profit organisations, funders appeared inclined to support capacity-building efforts rather than merely demanding data compliance. This stance indicates potential for more collaborative and supportive funder-grantee relationships. Some ideas discussed include:

## Seeing funders as collaborators and enablers, not just resource providers



Funders positioned themselves as partners who were sensitive to the many data-related challenges SPOs face day-to-day, from lack of capacity, to time and resources.

Funders proposed solutions such as working with SPOs to reduce the fear around reporting failures, and working together to learn from the data and improve the program design. For instance, one funder stated: "If you don't have the capacity, I will send people to you. I have staff on the bench, I have an accounting team, and the CSR team will sit with you and help you. CSR funders are not ATMs, we are partners."

Essentially, funders are willing to leverage their resources and strengths to bring in ecosystem support. They want to be seen as collaborators and partners, not just resource providers.

## Encouraging leadership to have grassroots context



Leadership must engage directly with the ground reality for data to truly make sense. Without this on-the-ground understanding, it becomes challenging to interpret data effectively and align it with stakeholder needs.

## Co-creating metrics



Another solution proposed was for funders and grantees to set metrics collaboratively. Sitting together to co-create the indicators, metrics, and evaluation frameworks will help ensure alignment in expectations, improve data quality, and foster mutual ownership of the data processes.

## Learning from each other



Funders expressed a desire to collaborate and share knowledge among themselves. Recognising that different funders are at varying stages in their data maturity journey, they emphasised the benefit of sharing practices, experiences, and lessons. These peer circles allow partners to share how they collect and use data, the indicators they rely on, and the challenges they face. This collective learning helps strengthen the ecosystem's capacity to handle data more effectively, rather than leaving each organisation to figure it out alone.

## Sharing data across organisations



Sharing data in a responsible manner can reduce duplication of effort, improve sector-wide understanding, and enable strategic coordination. This can be done with focused thematic cohorts—for example, bringing together organisations working on water security, energy solutions, or women's empowerment. Within such cohorts, progress can be measured consistently using common indicators. Building these cohorts helps funders and SPOs align on outcomes, making data more standardised and meaningful across projects.

# Conclusion

Much of the discussion at the roundtable aligned with the recommendations and findings from the *State of the Sector* report. Both underscored that culture and mindset matter more than systems, that qualitative data enriches quantitative evidence, and that feedback loops and capacity-building are central but often missing.

Funders echoed these themes while adding nuance from their vantage point. They highlighted how fear of reporting failures distorts data practices, how frontline voices and lived experiences are excluded from formal reports, and how misalignment among stakeholders undermines trust and collaboration.

From the roundtable, it is evident that funders are open to using the DMA framework to better understand where their grantee organisations stand in their data journey. Yet, they cautioned that the DMA must be treated as a diagnostic tool for growth, not a qualifying filter. Its application should be combined with practices that build both capacity and culture—addressing not just technical skills and systems, but also the trust, transparency, and mindset shifts required among implementers and funders alike.

The roundtable also brought to the fore larger issues of trust and accountability between funders and grantees. SPOs continue to fear exposing failures; data rarely circulates back

to frontline workers or community members; and shared metrics are often poorly understood, creating fragmented approaches to measurement. These challenges reaffirm that data maturity cannot be reduced to compliance or reporting outputs. True maturity means broadening the definition of data to include context, diverse voices, and learning. It means aligning expectations to reduce reporting burdens while ensuring meaningful use.

Taken together, the report and the roundtable suggest a more holistic framing of data maturity. It is not only about collecting, storing, and analysing numbers. It is about balancing quantitative rigour with qualitative depth, building trust across relationships, and shaping a culture where data is used for collective learning and adaptation. Data maturity, therefore, is as much a cultural and political shift as it is a technical one.

Finally, the roundtable raises a critical question for the future: how can funders, as enablers, advance data maturity in the sector? Both the discussion and the DMA findings highlight that the answer lies in collaboration. This shift can only happen when SPOs, enabling organisations, funders, governments, and communities work together to create an ecosystem where data becomes a shared asset for decision-making, accountability, and impact. Working collectively is the only way to move beyond compliance toward a sector that learns, adapts, and grows together.

# Annexure

List of Participants (roundtable and independent discussions)

Organisation	Participant
Michael & Susan Dell Foundation	Abhinav Bhatia
DCM Shriram	Aman Pannu
SVP India	Amita Chauhan
Tech Mahindra foundation	Chetan Kapoor
MPhasis	Deepa Nagraj
Independent Investor	Lloyd Mathais
Exl Services	Muskaan Jain
OneStage	Pratyush Panda
SVP India	Prasad Baji
Jindal Stainless	Pritika Chand

Organisation	Participant
AMM Foundation	Sajitha Rajeev
Independent Consultant	Samar Verma
360 One Foundation	Saumya Lashkari
Ashraya Hastha Trust	Sonya Fernandes
Infoedge	Srishti Madaan
Gates Foundation	Suneeta Krishnan
Bhikchandani Family Foundation	Tanvi Bhikchandani
KP Singh Foundation	Venu Nair
MacArthur Foundation	Yamini Mishra

Indian School of Development Management, supported by Citi India's CSR efforts, launched the Centre for Data Science and Social Impact (CDSSI) to connect Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs) with funders, academia, tech enablers and other experts, to drive rapid adoption of data and data science by the social sector.



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