ISDM
INDIAN SCHOOL OF
DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT

Rethinking Impact

From Metrics to Meaning

Convening Report

15 June 2026 | New Delhi

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Summary

Purpose of the Convening

Across the development sector, impact is still largely measured and reported through indicators fixed at the start of a program. They typically attribute the change to a single intervention over a particular project cycle that rarely matches the timelines in which real change unfolds.

Rethinking Impact: From Metrics to Meaning was convened to ask all the stakeholders involved in a development cycle whether this approach serves the people at the last mile and, if not, what a more honest, more useful alternative would look like.

The day brought together two lines of inquiry that had different journeys but converged on the same underlying question. The first, anchored in ISDM's Rural Development Impact Framework (RDIF), developed based on PRADAN's decades of place-based work, examined what sustained organisational engagement in a geography actually produces — and why conventional, attribution-based evaluation struggles to see it.

The second, anchored in ISDM's Developmental Measurement (DM)- Social Impact Measurement and Management (SIMM) approach, examined why measurement across the sector remains oriented toward reporting and compliance rather than learning and decision-making, and what would be required to make it a genuinely community-centred and adaptive.

Though the two tracks drew on different evidence bases — one on a single organisation's relationship with specific geographies for over 20 years, the other on a cross-organisational rubric of measurement practice — they converged on a shared premise- the sector's current tools answer "what changed" far more confidently than they answer "how," "for whom," and "because of what."

Both tracks treated this as a structural problem rather than a technical one, rooted in funding cycles, incentive structures, and who holds the power to define what counts as impact in the first place.

The conversation draws its relevance amid the growing pressure to demonstrate impact while practitioners continue to question whether the standardised indicators and endline evaluations actually capture the slower, relational, and structural change that development work is meant to enable. The convening was designed as a space to hold this tension openly — bringing funders, implementers, evaluators, researchers, and communities into direct conversation about what better measurement practice would actually require, in policy, in funding relationships, and in institutional culture.

Day at a Glance

07	**20**	**89**
Sessions	Speakers and Moderators	Attendees

Key Takeaways

Insight 1
Impact measurement across the sector still answers ‘what changed’ far more confidently than ‘how’, ‘for whom’, and ‘through what mechanism’ — and this gap is structural, not merely technical.

Insight 2
The people closest to the change — communities, field teams — are the least likely to shape how that change is defined, measured, or interpreted, in both place-based and organisation-wide measurement practice.

Insight 3
Funding cycles of one to three years are systematically mismatched with the 10-20 year timelines on which meaningful social and institutional change actually accumulates and becomes visible.

Insight 4
Across the sector, disproportionate resources are allocated towards proving impact to external stakeholders rather than improving practice through internal learning — a pattern that funders and implementers have jointly built and would need to jointly unwind.

Insight 5
Strong measurement and learning practice depends as much on organisational culture, capability, and shared stewardship as it does on the technical design of any single framework or indicator.

These insights do not really point to a missing indicator or a missing tool, rather a missing vocabulary and method for the kind of change long-term development and philanthropic work is actually meant to produce.

Both RDIF and DM-SIMM are attempts to build the vocabulary — one from the ground up, through a single organisation's sustained relationship with specific geographies; the other across organisations, through a shared rubric of measurement practice. Both are evolving pieces of work to be taken ahead in collaboration with sector stakeholders.

What is common to both the solutions is a reframing of the central question–not simply what changed, but how, for whom, and what role sustained presence, funding relationships, and institutional culture play in that change. Moving the sector toward these questions will require shifts in funding structures and reporting expectations as much as in measurement methods themselves.

The Challenge

The Questions We Set Out to Explore

- After decades of development work in India, why does the sector still lack an honest account of what sustained engagement actually produces — and why does measurement remain oriented toward reporting rather than learning and decision-making process?
- Whose definitions of impact currently dominate — funders', implementers', or communities' — and what would change if program priorities, indicators, and interpretations of change were genuinely co-created rather than set by whoever commissions the evaluation?
- What are the real limits of conventional, attribution-based impact evaluation? While it shows how much has changed, it rarely captures the how. It does not take into account the slower, less visible forms of change such as institutional strengthening and community agency, which are caused through the interplay of multiple contexts and mechanisms.
- If meaningful change takes 15 to 20 years to become visible, but most funding cycles run one to three years, is the funding system serving donor accountability problems rather than developmental needs?
- Is there a meaningful difference between changes (which can be reversed by the next shock) and transformation (where the underlying structural conditions shift), and what are the sectoral mechanisms to recognise transformation?

Who Was in the Room

The convening brought together veteran field practitioners, academics from different disciplines, funders and CSR foundations, MEL and evaluation specialists, social purpose organisations, and policy professionals — a curated mix of the actors who commission, conduct, fund, and live the consequences of impact measurement.

The day opened with all participants being primed with a self-immersive Provocation Gallery that presented real dilemmas from the impact ecosystem. The sessions began with a joint launch of both frameworks, before splitting into the RDIF and SIMM tracks.

Within the RDIF track, discussions moved from a historical and academic framing of Indian evaluation practice, to a presentation of the framework itself, to external discussants questioning its evidence base and limits, and finally to a direct conversation between funders and implementing organisations about what replication and adoption would actually require.

Within the SIMM track, the discussion opened with the central question of how measurement can evolve from tracking what organisations planned to do towards understanding what communities really experience, before moving into a rubric-based reflection exercise in which participants assessed organisational measurement maturity together, surfacing where stakeholders agreed and where they didn't.

Bringing this range of perspectives into the same room mattered because impact measurement has stakeholders well beyond whoever commissions it — communities, field professionals, boards, policymakers, and the wider research field all have a stake in what gets measured and why, and the convening was designed to make that plurality visible rather than resolve it prematurely.

What We Learned

This section takes each of the five insights introduced earlier and expands on it — why it matters, what it reveals about the underlying issue, and how it showed up across the two tracks.

Key Insight 1

Measurement answers "what changed" far more confidently than "how" or "for whom"
Across both tracks, participants converged on the same diagnosis–conventional evaluation is well equipped to show that something changed, but poorly equipped to show how, for whom, or through what mechanism. In the RDIF track, this surfaced as a distinction between change (which can be reversed by the next shock) — a good harvest followed by a drought, an income gain wiped out by a health shock — and transformation (where the underlying structural conditions themselves shift), such as a community's relationship to power, knowledge, or markets. When panellists were asked directly whether they had seen transformation by this definition, the answers varied, but the distinction itself reframed the day– a lot of what gets reported as impact may be change that hasn't yet been tested against a shock, not transformation. This matters because it exposes attribution-style reporting as structurally short-sighted. It can confirm that an indicator moved without ever establishing whether the underlying system actually changed.

Key Insight 2

The people closest to the change have the least influence over how it is defined
A recurring theme in the SIMM track was that meaningful impact cannot be determined solely by funders or implementing organisations, yet in practice, goals, indicators, and interpretations of change are set predominantly by whoever commissions or funds the work. Participants argued that community perspectives need to shape program goals, indicators, and interpretations of change throughout the program lifecycle, not only when results are reported back. The RDIF track's framing questions carried a related concern from a different angle, asking whether evaluation methods have kept pace with the full plurality of stakeholders — communities, field professionals, boards, policymakers — who have a stake in what gets measured, or whether methods have in fact narrowed in spite of that plurality. This matters because indicators set without the input of the people living the change tend to measure what is visible to evaluators rather than what is actually experienced on the ground.

Key Insight 3

Funding cycles and the timeline of real change are mismatched

RDIF's evidence from Gumla showed that villages where PRADAN worked intensively had meaningfully higher agricultural incomes than neighbouring villages — but this difference only became visible after roughly two decades of sustained engagement, far longer than the 1-3 year grant cycles organisations typically operate within. Participants acknowledged that organisations are routinely asked to demonstrate impact on timelines much shorter than the timeline on which impact actually accumulates, and the question of who holds the power to change this — and why it hasn't changed — was left open for continued reflection. This matters because it locates a core sector problem in funding design rather than organisational performance.

Key Insight 4

Proving has superseded improving, and both funders and implementers built that pattern together

Across both tracks, participants returned to the observation that organisations invest disproportionate resources (time, energy, human resource) in demonstrating impact to external stakeholders, often at the expense of the internal learning that would actually strengthen their work. The RDIF track framed this explicitly as neither a funder problem nor an implementer problem alone, but a pattern both sides have built into their systems and both would need to change together. The SIMM track reached a parallel conclusion from the funders' side of the relationship. Participants acknowledged that funding relationships significantly shape what organisations measure, how they report, and whether adaptation is encouraged at all, and agreed that funders can shift this by supporting longer-term partnerships and treating programs as evolving hypotheses rather than fixed plans. This matters because it reframes 'better measurement' as a shared incentive-design problem rather than a technical fix either side can make independently.

Key Insight 5

Strong measurement depends on culture, capability, and shared stewardship as much as on technical design

A rubric exercise in the SIMM track showed that many organisations already possess data systems but struggle to institutionalise learning because of limited internal capacity, fragmented ownership of MEL functions, or insufficient organisational commitment. This results in different stakeholders assessing the same data, often arriving at different judgements of its maturity, surfacing assumptions and blind spots. Participants noted that the dialogue behind the assessment was often more valuable than the resulting score. The RDIF track's discussion of a possible 'ceiling' pointed to the fact that a related dynamic at the level of an entire framework–sustained, high-quality engagement did not produce the same outcomes everywhere, and introducing a structural ceiling is only useful if it prompts a harder conversation about what an organisation is actually trying to achieve. This matters because it shifts the unit of analysis for 'better measurement' away from any single tool or indicator and toward organisational capability, ownership, and honesty about limits.

The Shifts/ Takeaways

The two tracks pointed to clear shifts in how the sector could think about, fund, and practise measurement.

Current state	**Desired state**
From Attribution to Contribution	
Impact assessment across the sector still defaults to attribution-style thinking — asking what a specific intervention caused and reporting accordingly, even when the underlying change is shaped by multiple actors over a long period. This was the central tension the RDIF track set out to address.	Organisations and funders increasingly ask what sustained engagement contributed to a broader pattern of change, treating impact as co-produced rather than owned by a single actor — the reframing at the heart of the RDIF framework.
This shift changes how impact is reported and what kinds of work get valued, funded, and sustained — particularly the slower, relationship-based work that doesn't fit attribution-style logic.	
From Reporting Tool to Decision-Making Tool	
Impact measurement mostly occurs at the end of a cycle as a reporting exercise aimed primarily at external audiences.	In the RDIF track, this showed up as a call for frameworks designed to work with an organisation's everyday thinking — informing program design, resource allocation, and strategy, not just retrospective reporting.
This is a shift in what organisations believe measurement is for–from justification after the fact to input into decisions as they are being made.	
From Measurement for Accountability to Measurement for Learning	
Measurement is frequently designed to satisfy reporting requirements, demonstrate predetermined results, and fulfil donor expectations, with indicators that often stay fixed throughout implementation. This was	Measurement becomes an integral management practice that continuously informs program decisions, enables adaptation, and strengthens implementation throughout the program lifecycle —

<table>
<tr><td>the starting diagnosis of the SIMM track.</td><td>the shift the SIMM track's rubric was designed to support.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Embedding learning into measurement allows organisations to respond to complexity, improve program effectiveness, and ensure evidence contributes to better decisions rather than simply documenting past performance.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">From Funder-Led Definitions of Success to Shared Stewardship of Impact</td></tr>
<tr><td>Program priorities, indicators, and reporting requirements are often set primarily by funders, with limited room for communities and implementing organisations to shape how success is defined — a pattern the SIMM track examined closely.</td><td>Funders, implementing organisations, and communities jointly shape pathways to impact, co-create learning priorities, and use evidence collaboratively to strengthen outcomes over time.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Shared stewardship builds stronger partnerships, improves program relevance, and enables more context-responsive approaches grounded in communities' lived realities rather than externally imposed assumptions.</td></tr>
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Actions Ahead

The discussions across both tracks pointed to concrete next steps, organised below by stakeholder group.

For Funders

- Look directly at the mismatch between funding cycles (one to three years) and the timeline the evidence suggests real change requires (fifteen to twenty years), and consider what would need to change in reporting requirements, timelines, and attribution expectations to fund for the latter.
- Pilot learning-oriented funding partnerships that explicitly support adaptation throughout implementation, and build in flexibility within reporting requirements to accommodate evidence-driven programme changes.
- Invest in long-term relationships that enable shared learning rather than short-term accountability, and treat programmes as evolving hypotheses rather than fixed plans.
- When implementing partners describe impact that goes beyond standard indicators, create space for that conversation rather than defaulting to the log-frame — it may reflect what the funding is actually producing more accurately than the agreed metrics do.

For Practitioners, Implementing Organisations, and Social Purpose Organisations

- If you work in complex contexts, engage with RDIF's ongoing validation phase; organisations interested in engaging with the framework beyond this convening are invited to reach out.
- Use the SIMM Adoption Rubric as an internal reflection and organisational development tool across program, leadership, and MEL teams.
- Look for the gap between change and transformation in your own reporting — where are you describing a shift that hasn't yet been tested against a shock, versus one that has actually altered underlying conditions?
- Strengthen institutional MEL capacity by integrating measurement into program management rather than treating it as a standalone reporting function, and build structured mechanisms to bring community perspectives into defining outcomes and interpreting evidence.
- Start building the documentation systems that long-term impact thinking requires now, even before a shared framework is fully in place.

For Researchers, Evaluators, and Intermediaries

- Continue testing RDIF's transferability beyond PRADAN's specific context, and investigate the ceiling question directly — where do ecological, market, or political-economy limits cap what sustained engagement can achieve, and what evidence would help the sector distinguish a programme that has failed from one that has hit a structural limit it cannot move alone?

- Develop practical guidance, case studies, and tools that help organisations operationalise learning-oriented measurement, and generate evidence on how adaptive measurement approaches influence programme quality and organisational learning.
- Continue convening cross-sector dialogues that let practitioners exchange experience and refine emerging practice, and support the growth of a community of practice that tests and strengthens frameworks like RDIF and DM-SIMM through real-world application.

Open Questions for Continued Exploration

- What is the right unit of analysis for a place-based framework — village, cluster, block, or something else — and how do local explanations of change aggregate upward without losing their meaning?
- How much standardisation is desirable before a framework's sensitivity to context is lost?
- How can community-centred measurement be operationalised across diverse contexts, and how should learning be balanced against accountability requirements?
- What would it take for policy, or the state's relationship with its most marginalised citizens, to shift in ways that lie beyond what any programme or philanthropic grant can substitute for?

Appendix

Detailed Agenda and Speakers

<table>
<tr><th>Time</th><th>Track 1 – RD Framework (PRADAN)</th><th>Track 2 – SIMM Framework (ISDM)</th></tr>
<tr><td>9:00–9:15</td><td colspan="2">Registration</td></tr>
<tr><td>9:15–9:45</td><td colspan="2">Provocation Gallery + Tea break</td></tr>
<tr><td>9:45–10:30</td><td colspan="2">Launch of Rural Development Impact Framework (RDIF) and Social Impact Measurement and Management (SIMM) Approach</td></tr>
<tr><td>Day Splits into Two Tracks from 10:30 onwards</td><td>Track 1: RDIF</td><td>Track 2: SIMM</td></tr>
<tr><td>10:30–12:30</td><td>Session 1: Two-Part Plenary

Part A (10:30–11:30): The Case for a New Lens: Impact, Evidence and the Making of RDIF

Moderator:
Prof Suraj Jacob, Centre for Development Studies
Speakers:
Amarjeet Sinha, Ex-IAS & Senior Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress
Neelima Khetan, CSR Advisor
Prof. Tushar Shah, former Director, IRMA
Part B (11:30–12:30): Presentation of the Framework + Discussion

Speakers:
Apoorva Oza, Global Lead (Agriculture, Food Security & Climate Resilience), Aga Khan Foundation
Shilp Verma, Deputy Country Representative (India), International Water Management Institute (IWMI)
Bikalp Chamola, Asst. Professor, Azim Premji University
Muddasir Ahmad Akhoon, Assistant Professor, Goa Institute of Management</td><td>Session 1: SIMM Approach Sessions

Panel discussion on “Who Owns The Impact”, the current state of social impact and the need for the SIMM framework, followed by an extensive, structured audience Q&A.

Moderator:
Divya Chopra, M&E Lead, CEGIS
Speakers:
Jigisha Maheta, Managing Director, SEWA Cooperative Federation
Narendranath Damodaran, National Anchor, National Coalition for Natural Farming
Suneeta Krishnan, Deputy Director, Strategy, Planning & Management, Evaluation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (India Office)</td></tr>
</table>

12:30–13:00	Knowledge Kiosk and Networking break	
13:00–13:45	Lunch	
13:45–15:15 [90 mins]	Session 2: Learning from RDIF: Replication, Adoption and What It Takes to Scale A panel of 4 organisational leaders comment on how this framework can be scaled, on the challenges of replication, and on where they disagree. *Moderator:* ● Narendranath Damodaran, National Anchor, National Coalition for Natural Farming *Speakers:* ● Dhruvi Shah, Executive Trustee and Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Axis Bank Foundation ● Naveen Patidar, CEO, Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India) ● Saroj Mahapatra, Executive Director, PRADAN	Session 2: Impact Design Sprint - Mixed-Cohort Problem-Solving A hands on exercise with the SIMM Adoption Rubric to surface gaps between intended and actual use of measurement. *Facilitators:* ● Archana Pillai, Resident Mentor, NSRCEL, IIM Bangalore ● Sulab Kumar, ISDM ● Kankana Trivedi, ISDM ● Krutika Katre, The Nudge Institute ● Sulagna Choudhuri, 4th Wheel Social Impact
15:15–15:45	Tea Break	
15:45–16:45	Session 3 Collab Lab – Working Session (RDIF Guidebook + Integrated Discussion) Hands-on working session to engage participants with the RDIF Handbook and framework. *Facilitators:* ● Muddasir Ahmad Akhoon, Assistant Professor, Goa Institute of Management ● Shruti Mishra, ISDM ● Kuntalika Kumbhakar, PRADAN ● Tamali Kundu, PRADAN	Session 3: Facilitated participant discussion from Session 2
16:45–17:00	Close – Synthesis, Commitments & Invitation to Action	

List of Attendees

Sl no.	Full Name	Organisation Name
1	Anaga Ramachandran	Center for Evidence and Implementation
2	Naghma Abidi	Indian School of Development Management
3	Simrita	ISDM
4	Rashmi Adlekha	HARSHA TRUST
5	Karan Babbar	XLRI Jamshedpur
6	Vinay Kumar Jha	OPJGU
7	Nirved Kumar	IIM Ahmedabad and IIT Delhi
8	Dr Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay	Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)
9	Prasann Thatte	American India Foundation
10	Prabhleen	The YP Foundation
11	Saikat Pal	PRASARI
12	Arunnanand Murmu	Mobile Creches
13	Hrithika Goswami	GRAAM
14	Sayantani Gaddam	Sabbatical
15	Kakul Misra	ISDM
16	Kavitha Aranha	Saahas
17	Gitanjali Das	Learning Links Foundation
18	Srishti Pal	Mobile Creches
19	Shubhangi Madan	ISDM
20	Dr Leena Sushant	Mobile Creches
21	Kalyani Kumar	Adhyayan Quality Education Foundation
22	Nishtha Kapoor	Adhyayan Quality Education Foundation
23	Vaishnavi Pawar	ISDM
24	Michelle Markos	Sunbird Trust
25	Pooja Jha	Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement
26	Sudhir Sahni	Independent Consultant
27	Soumya Mohanty	PRADAN
28	Shobhit Mathur	Tech Mahindra Foundation
29	Gaurav Khandelwal	Foundation for Innovation and Action
30	Rimmy Taneja	Capgemini Technology Services India Limited
31	Pallavi Kulshrestha	Dream a Dream

32	Ranjesh Prasad	Infokul Grameen Services Private Limited
33	Monica Datta	Capgemini
34	Devleena Chatterji	Climate Asia
35	Aditi Jha	Breakthrough Trust
36	Rani Yadav	Breakthrough
37	Neha Parakh	LEAD at Krea University
38	Raman Kataria	Jan Swasthya Sahyog
39	Radhika Saha	AVPN
40	Mohini Mehta	Foundation for Living Knowledge (FOLK)
41	Rajesh Singhi	Wiseant development partners
42	Ramesh Venkatraman	Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement (SVYM)
43	Jyoti Sharma	Nasscom Foundation
44	Sakshi Grover	Ecolife Foundation
45	Navneet Kumar	Aga Khan Foundation (India)
46	Azhad Ali	Aga Khan Foundation
47	Kent Bhupathi	Epsilon Executive Education
48	Aakriti Uttam	Society for Development Alternatives
49	Rupal Singhvi	Indian School of Development Management
50	RASHMI SAHU	FRIENDS OF WOMEN'S WORLD BANKING INDIA
51	Babita Maher	Ahvaan
52	Sakshee Sharma	Ahvaan Trust
53	Yatesh Yadav	Ibtada
54	Ravi Dhanuka	I-Saksham Education And Learning Foundation
55	Nischal Bhardwaj	Nasscom Foundation
56	Rakesh Kumar Gupta	ISDM
57	Subodh Gupta	SARAL SERVICES
58	Smita Rawat	Saral Services
59	Shramanth Rajarathnam	86B Research and Advisory
60	Sanjay Singh	Goonj
61	Nitin Datta	ICRW
62	Naveen Patidar	AKRSP
63	Ritesh Agarwal	Ford Foundation
64	Sri Harsha Dantuluri	Independent
65	Gyan Prakash Rai	Naveen Jindhal Foundation

66	Gaurav Shah.	ARMAAN
67	KK Dash	India Education Diary
68	Mohiuddin Ahmed	HARSHA TRUST
69	Tash	YP Foundation

Links to reports

📓 **A methodological framework for assessing the long-term impact of a nonprofit's work in a geography**

📓 **Roots of change: A realist framework for long-term rural development impact**

📓 **Roots of change: A handbook for mapping systemic change in rural development**

📓 **Principles for Reimagining Social Impact Measurement and Management (SIMM) practices**

📓 **DM-SIMM: A funder's guide to reflect, learn, and act on social impact**

📓 **DM-SIMM: An Implementation Organisation's Guide to Reflect, Learn, and Act on Social Impact**

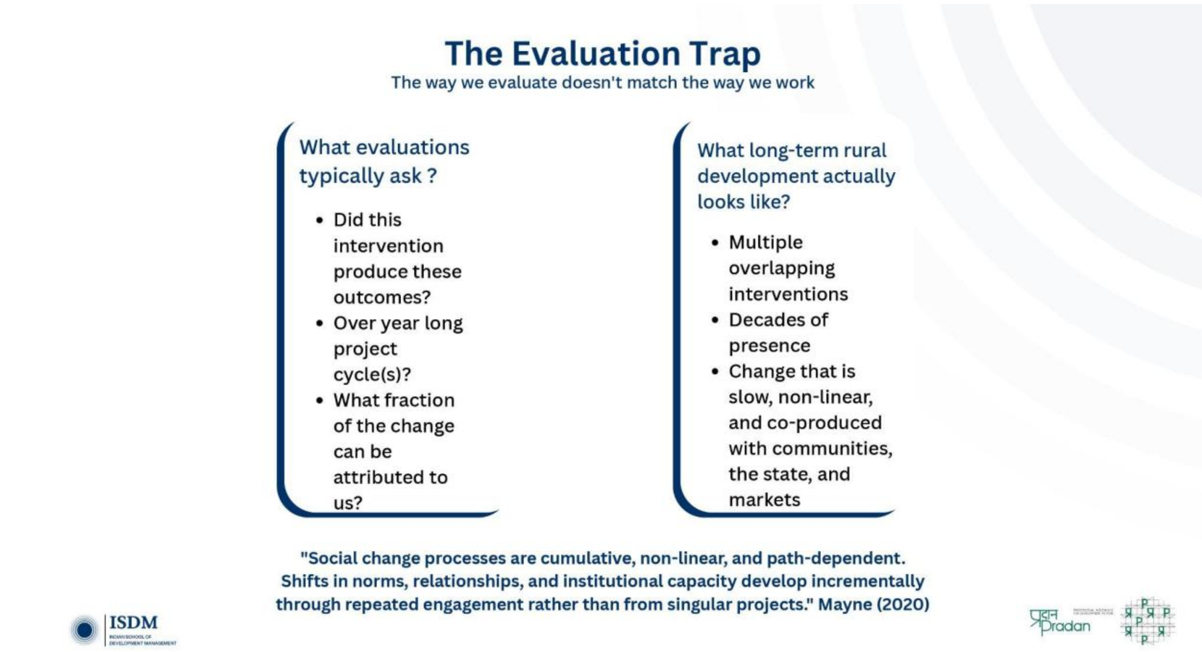
Media Coverage

https://thecsruniverse.com/articles/isdm-and-pradan-launch-new-frameworks-to-rethink-social-impact-measurement-in-india

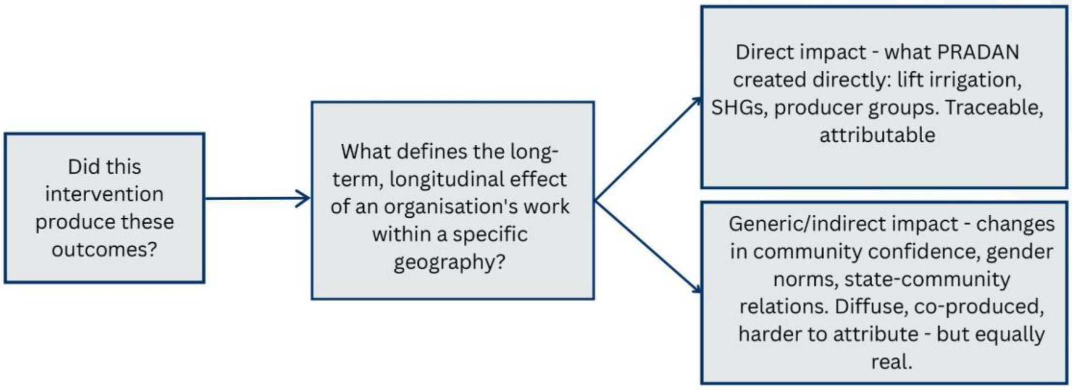
https://www.pninews.com/amp/from-dashboards-to-decisions-isdm-and-pradan-launch-new-frameworks-to-shift-how-india-measures-social-impact/

https://indiaeducationdiary.in/from-dashboards-to-decisions-isdm-and-pradan-launch-new-frameworks-to-shift-how-india-measures-social-impact/


Rural Development Impact Framework
Assessing the long-term impact of PRADAN's work in Gumla and Dhamtari


The Evaluation Trap
The way we evaluate doesn't match the way we work
What evaluations typically ask ?
• Did this intervention produce these outcomes?
• Over year long project cycle(s)?
• What fraction of the change can be attributed to us?
What long-term rural development actually looks like?
• Multiple overlapping interventions
• Decades of presence
• Change that is slow, non-linear, and co-produced with communities, the state, and markets
"Social change processes are cumulative, non-linear, and path-dependent. Shifts in norms, relationships, and institutional capacity develop incrementally through repeated engagement rather than from singular projects." Mayne (2020)
ISDM
Pradan

Shifting the question



Attribution asks: how much?
Contribution asks: were we a necessary part of why this happened?

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Two places, one puzzle

	Gumla (Jharkhand)	**Dhamtari (Chhattisgarh)**
PRADAN's entry	Mid-1990s — 25+ years	2005 — 20 years
What PRADAN found	Emerging institutions. Limited government interventions, thin markets, rainfed subsistence agriculture	Institutional thicket. DAY-NRLM active, MGNREGA running, SHGs already existing
Agriculture	Rainfed kharif, high seasonal distress migration	Irrigated Paddy + forest economy; better irrigation
PRADAN's role	Creator and mobiliser	Facilitator and convergence broker

Same organisation, same values, same broad approach - but radically different structural conditions. The comparison is the analytical engine of this study.

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Why realist evaluation?

THE STANDARD APPROACH - DOESN'T FIT
RCTs require a baseline, a control group, and a fixed intervention. PRADAN entered Gumla in the mid-1990s. There is no baseline. The strategy evolved across six phases. The "intervention" is an organisation's entire presence in a place.

REALIST EVALUATION ASKS A DIFFERENT QUESTION

Not: Did it work? But: What worked, for whom, in what context, through which mechanisms, and why?

GENERATIVE CAUSALITY — WHAT THIS BUYS US
Instead of measuring inputs and outputs, we reconstruct the causal logic: *if context C enables mechanism M, then outcome O follows — because people reason, feel, and act in specific ways given specific resources*. This survives the absence of a baseline and accommodates a strategy that evolved.

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The IPT to CMO pipeline

INITIAL PROGRAMME THEORY (IPT)

The educated guess before fieldwork.
Built from PRADAN's own documents, practitioner interviews, and existing theory.
Answers: what should be happening, according to whom, based on what logic?

FIELDWORK REFINEMENT

47 FGDs and 37 interviews test the IPT against lived experience.

Where the theory holds, it becomes a CMO. Where it breaks, context reveals why.

CONTEXT–MECHANISM–OUTCOME (CMO) CONFIGURATIONS
Testable, conditional causal claims.
"In villages WITH enough water and community leadership (context), PRADAN's agricultural training mobilises investment in farming (mechanism), leading to surplus, reduced migration, and functioning SHGs (outcome)."

The if-then-because logic that drives the entire analysis.

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How we built the IPT for PRADAN

42 INTROSCAPE ARTICLES PRADAN's own practitioner magazine across two decades. First-person accounts of what professionals observed. Source of the "before" and the mechanism language.	**20 ANNUAL REPORTS** Traced how PRADAN's theory of change shifted from phase to phase. The locus of agency, the balance between livelihoods and governance, the shift toward systems thinking.
6 PROFESSIONAL INTERVIEWS + 1 FGD Institutional memory. Recovered the reasoning behind strategic pivots that documentation alone couldn't explain.	**ABDUCTIVE + RETRODUCTIVE REASONING** Not deduction (applying a theory) or induction (summarising patterns). Abduction: what's the best explanation for what we see? Retroduction: what structures must exist to make this outcome possible?

No baseline. Evolving strategy. 30 years of activity. This is how we reconstructed the causal logic.

The IPT is not a description of what PRADAN did. It is a theory of how what they did was supposed to work — and why.

Mixed methods design

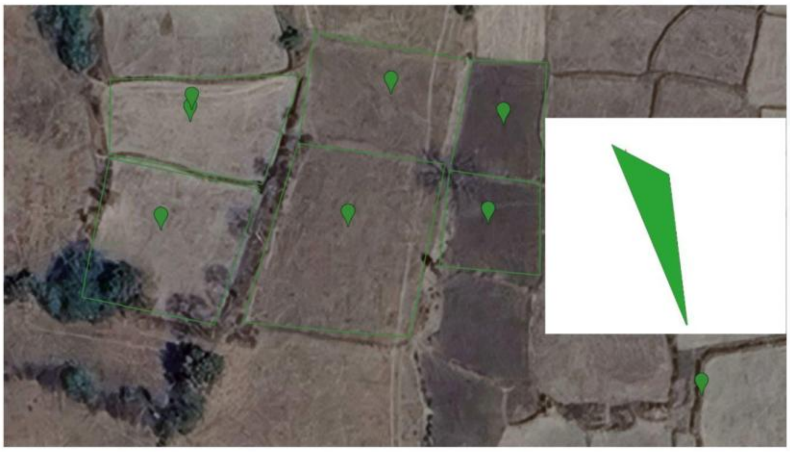
Qualitative Data
47 FGDs + 37 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS
Builds and refines the CMO configurations. Generates the causal language from the community's own voice.

Cross-Sectional household survey
2,010 HOUSEHOLDS, 201 VILLAGES, GUMLA + DHAMTARI
Tests whether patterns from qualitative analysis hold at scale. Measures income, migration, women's empowerment.

Village-level survey:
201 VILLAGES
What does a PRADAN village look like vs. a non-PRADAN village? Lift irrigation, producer groups, trust, caste inclusion.

Geo-spatial panel
800 FARM PLOTS, NDVI SATELLITE IMAGERY, 2017–2024
38,000+ plot-month observations. Vegetation index as a proxy for agricultural productivity — measured independently of self-report.

How to merge on ground survey data with satellite data



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NDVI as proxy for productivity

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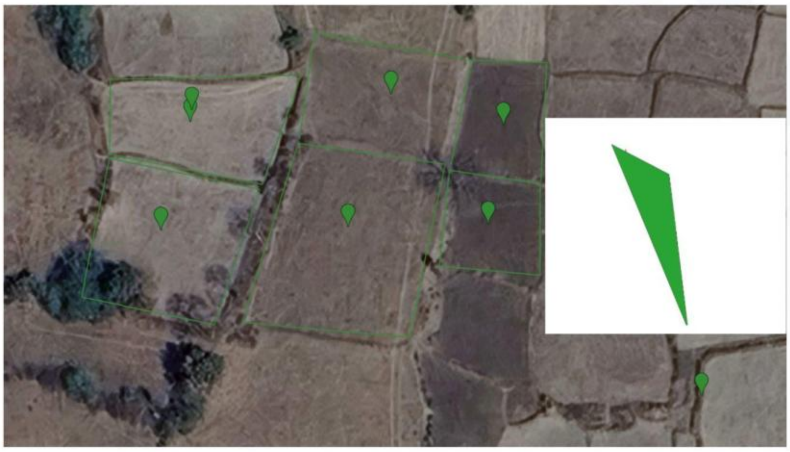
How to merge on ground survey data with satellite data



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NDVI as proxy for productivity

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Sampling strategy and village classification

PRADAN works in **intensive villages** (deep, multi-year engagement), **non-intensive villages** (lighter presence), and has never worked in some villages.
But these are not randomly distributed. PRADAN tends to enter the most marginalised, least accessible, most agriculturally challenged places

AGRICULTURAL SUITABILITY INDEX for 2005
We constructed an independent measure of a village's agricultural potential from 8 satellite and climate datasets (soil moisture, rainfall variability, elevation, land cover). This let us separate "PRADAN villages are poorer because they were targeted" from "PRADAN villages show lower outcomes because the intervention didn't work."

12 STRATA × 2 DISTRICTS
Three PRADAN categories × four agricultural suitability quartiles. 201 villages sampled proportionally. 10 HHs for each village, 2 from each direction.

Gumla: building from scratch in a void

Phase 1: LIFT IRRIGATION + WUAs — Creating the first agricultural surplus in a rainfed landscape.

Phase 2: SHGs + RABI CROPPING — Extending agriculture into the dry season. Women staying in the village.

Phase 3: CLUSTERS + HORTICULTURE - Commercial cropping. Mango plantations. Income diversification.

Phase 4: MGNREGA + GOVERNMENT CONVERGENCE — Scaling through the state. Geography expands; depth is protected.

Creation and mobilisation. Impact here is visible in the landscape, traceable to PRADAN, and measurable 25 years on.

Dhamtari: navigating a thicket

WHAT ALREADY EXISTED WHEN PRADAN ARRIVED

DAY-NRLM running. MGNREGA active. Many SHGs already formed under DRPP and State Mission. Irrigation infrastructure present. Some villages with histories of organised land rights struggle. State visible in roads, pensions, and ration cards.

WHAT PRADAN ADDED

Depth to existing SHGs — from savings collectives to institutions capable of collective action. Convergence brokerage — getting multiple government schemes to arrive at the same household. Confidence to engage the administration directly. Quality of governance in producer groups and federations. **PRADAN's role here was not to build infrastructure — it was to ensure that existing infrastructure reached the most marginalised.**

Impact here does not live in new structures. It lives in changed processes — who gets a scheme, how a woman speaks in a gram sabha, whether the poorest household is included or excluded from a producer group.

The CMO configurations

Four causal configurations emerged from 47 FGDs and 37 interviews. Each is a testable if-then-because claim.

	IF	THEN	BECAUSE
1a	Village has water access + households trapped in distress migration	Agricultural surplus created; migration falls; income rises	Farming becomes worth staying for. The city stops being the only option.
1b	CMO 1a worked — migration fell + PRADAN visits frequently	SHGs function; loans go into seeds, not emergencies	Women are present. When women stay, the group exists. When harvest repays loans, the cycle sustains.
1c	SHGs functioning + women have built collective confidence	Women enter gram sabhas, panchayats, federation roles	The SHG is the rehearsal space. The gram sabha is the stage. Training gives women a language for the state.
2	Upland/midland terrain, no surface water + strong local leadership	Fallow land converted — wells dug, hapas built, plantations established	Water harvesting requires cooperation before it yields anything. Leadership makes people show up for a long-horizon task.

The CMO configurations

WHERE THE CHAIN BREAKS

	IF	THEN	BECAUSE
3	Unfavourable biophysics + weak social organisation	No mechanism fires. Migration persists. SHGs survive on consumption loans.	Context is the active ceiling. The mechanism needs fuel — and the fuel isn't there.
4	No PRADAN + DAY-NRLM active + history of organised struggle	Strong SHGs and collective action emerge without PRADAN	Endogenous social capital can substitute for an external catalyst. Sharpens what PRADAN's unique contribution actually is.

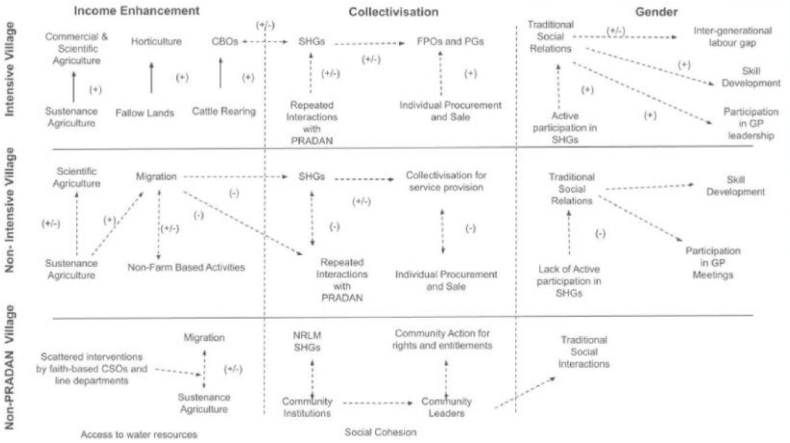
The chain — agriculture → surplus → SHGs → empowerment — is conditional at every link. Context determines whether the next link holds.

Impact and contribution pathways: the full picture

The chain holds. Subsistence agriculture → commercial surplus → SHGs functioning → FPOs → women in GP leadership. Each step creates the conditions for the next.

The chain is partial. Agriculture improves but migration doesn't fall enough. SHGs form but lack sustained engagement. Women participate in panchayats but without collective backing.

NRLM SHGs exist. Community cohesion varies. But the institutional layering — the accumulation of connected interventions over time — is absent.



The figure is not a theory. It is a reconstruction of what actually happened — built from the data.

Agricultural Productivity: what satellite data tells us

GUMLA — PRADAN VILLAGES ARE GREENER

Overall NDVI: 0.8% higher in PRADAN villages. Modest overall, but meaningful when multiplied across seasons and hectares.

RABI SEASON: THE STRONGEST SIGNAL

3.6% higher NDVI in PRADAN villages in rabi. Equivalent to ~1.3–1.6 extra quintals per hectare. This is PRADAN's water-harvesting fingerprint — dry-season agriculture on terrain where water was previously unavailable.

MIDLAND PLOTS: WHERE PRADAN'S WORK SHOWS MOST CLEARLY

4.5% higher NDVI in midland areas — the most challenging agro-ecology — equivalent to ~2.7 extra quintals per hectare.

DHAMTARI — NO PRODUCTIVITY ADVANTAGE

NDVI in PRADAN Dhamtari villages is not higher. Not because PRADAN failed — but because productivity there reflects market orientation and cropping choices, not yield gains.

DURATION OF PRADAN EXPOSURE MATTERS FOR PRODUCTIVITY GAINS

The results suggest diminishing marginal returns to prolonged PRADAN engagement. While long-exposed villages remain more productive overall, additional PRADAN presence generates progressively smaller productivity gains in mature intervention areas.

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The satellite data useed to address the attribution questions. What it shows is 7 years of vegetation change on 800 farm plots.

प्रदान Pradan

Income and Migration: What the Survey Shows

GUMLA — THE GAP IS CLEAR AND SIGNIFICANT	DHAMTARI — THE PATTERN REVERSES
Kharif income per acre: ₹31,000 (PRADAN) vs. ₹23,000 (non-PRADAN)	Kharif income per acre: ₹39,000 (PRADAN) vs. ₹41,000 (non-PRADAN)
Total agricultural income per acre: ₹34,000 (PRADAN) vs. ₹27,000 (non-PRADAN) — statistically significant	Total agricultural income per acre: ₹47,000 (PRADAN) vs. ₹50,000 (non-PRADAN)
Greater irrigation access and improved farming practices drive the kharif advantage. The gap is real, persistent, and aligns with what the qualitative fieldwork found.	Non-PRADAN villages start from a higher baseline. PRADAN's contribution here likely operates through diversification, risk reduction, and non-farm livelihoods — not per-acre yield gains.

Income and migration are not as tightly coupled as the theory of change assumed. Distress migration is not only an income problem — it has structural, social, and aspirational dimensions that income gains alone do not resolve. While nature of it shows difference, results are not statistically significant.

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प्रदान Pradan

Women's Empowerment: five dimensions

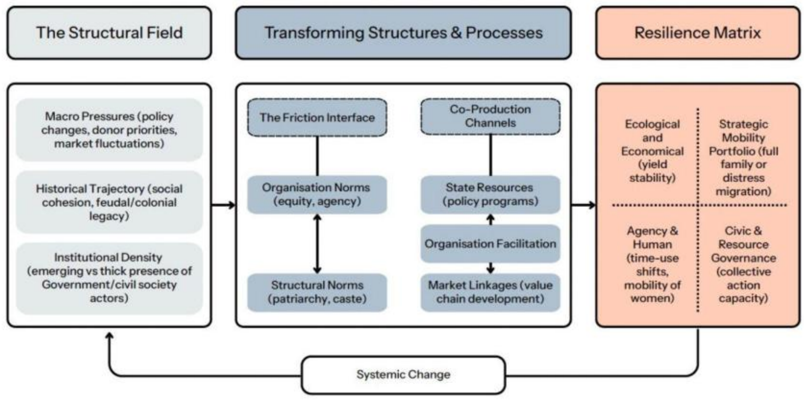
GUMLA — THE GAP IS CLEAR AND SIGNIFICANT	DHAMTARI — THE PATTERN REVERSES
In PRADAN villages women score 0.35–0.45 standard deviations above the sample mean on all five indices. Non-PRADAN women score 0.15–0.20 below it. Every gap is statistically significant at $p<0.001$.	Strong gains on resource access, self-efficacy, household influence, and structural decisions. But mobility — physical freedom to travel alone to markets, health centres, and places outside the village — shows no significant advantage and may even be slightly negative. Deep-seated norms around women's movement require longer, more sustained norm-focused work.
unpaid care work falls slightly; income work rises. Women are entering the economy — and their domestic burden is modestly lightening.	agency gains are real, but care burdens persist. Women make more decisions, have more voice — but still shoulder the same share of domestic work.

Empowerment is not one thing. A woman can gain voice in a gram sabha and still not be allowed to go to the market alone. The five indices show where change has reached — and where it hasn't yet.

Village-level analysis: what institutions tell us

SHGs ARE EVERYWHERE — THEY ARE NOT THE DIFFERENTIATOR 98% of all surveyed villages (PRADAN and non-PRADAN) have SHGs. Government saturation has made SHG formation near-universal. What matters is not whether SHGs exist — but how they function, what they do, and what they're connected to.	**LIFT IRRIGATION IS THE CLEAREST MARKER OF PRADAN'S PRESENCE** Present in 32.3% of intensive PRADAN villages vs. 5.7% of non-PRADAN villages ($p=0.006$). Producer Groups exist only in intensive PRADAN villages (6.5% vs. 0%). These are capital-intensive and technically complex. Neither the state nor communities could create them alone.
THE TRUST PARADOX Generalised social trust — "do people trust each other here?" — is actually higher in non-PRADAN villages (47.7%) than in intensive PRADAN villages (24.6%). But caste-based exclusion from SHGs is lower in PRADAN villages.	**Intensive development work disrupts existing equilibria. It surfaces conflicts, contests power, and challenges who belongs where. Lower reported trust during this process may signal productive friction — not failure. The rebuilding is visible in the lower exclusion figures.**

The Rural Development Impact Framework



The feedback arrow is the most important element: when resilience outcomes reach a threshold, they begin to alter the structural field itself. That is what systems change actually looks like.

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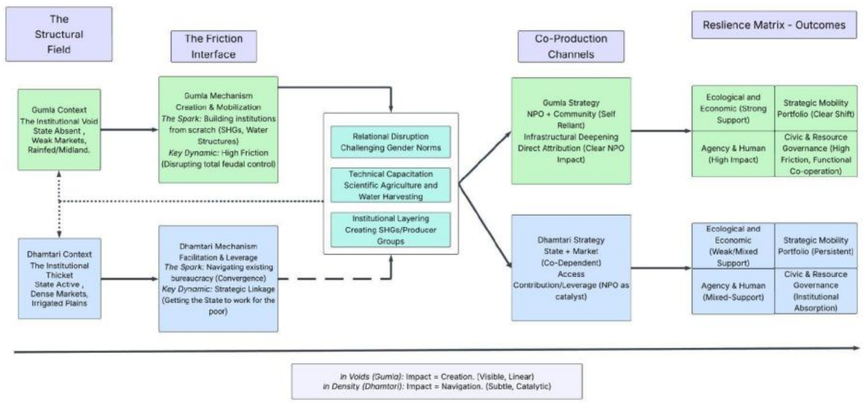
RDIF applied: Gumla vs. Dhamtari



In voids, impact = creation. Visible, linear, attributable.
In thickets, impact = navigation. Subtle, catalytic, relational.
Both are real. Both require different evaluative tools to see.

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Key photos


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EXIT
If you are funding activities, you are NOT funding impact. You are funding expensive paperwork.


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