



Funders MEL Lab

A 6-Month Action Lab for Funders
seeking to integrate Power-Sharing
with Institutional Accountability



Funders shouldn't be forced to choose between trust-based power-sharing and rigorous board accountability.

By anchoring evaluation around how change actually happens — through people, relationships and changing contexts — we can create practical tools that make sense of complexity and turn it into clear, credible stories about what is happening, what is changing and why.

Evaluation transforms from an administrative tax into a vital strategic ally for systemic change.

Welcome to the future of MEL for funding organisations

The Three Traps Facing Funders Today

Funding organisations across philanthropy, impact investing, public funds, and participatory networks are **moving to long-term, unrestricted, and flexible funding**: shifting power back to partners on the ground and supporting genuine, systemic change.

However, when it comes to monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL), organisations almost universally hit an institutional wall. Lacking evaluation frameworks designed for living systems and complexity, organisations consistently fall into one of three traps:

- **Trap 1: Falling Back on Linear Paradigms.** Defaulting to conventional tracking metrics, forcing complex, relationship-driven work into fixed frameworks simply to meet reporting and board requirements.
- **Trap 2: Evidence Flattening & Friction in Translation.** Nurturing participatory, qualitative learning on the ground, but lacking the translation mechanics to communicate dynamic data to leadership, boards, and the public.
- **Trap 3: Avoiding Measurement Altogether.** Abandoning formal evaluation entirely under the banner of trust-based funding, creating strategic blindness for both funders and changemakers.

The Result: All three traps limit what evaluation can offer. They can create unnecessary reporting burdens, make it harder to learn and make good decisions, or reduce complex, relationship-driven work to a set of measures that don't tell the whole story. In each case, there is a risk that evaluation becomes disconnected from the people and the change it is there to support.

The Pathway Forward: Evaluation as an Ally

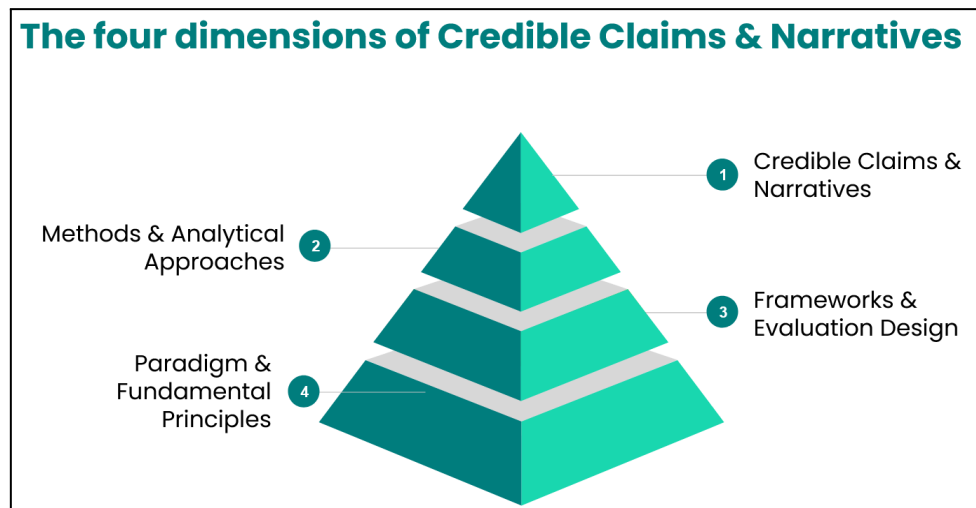
Moving beyond these traps means connecting what is happening on the ground with what funders need to learn, communicate and make decisions. This lab is built around two core pillars:

1. **Systemic & Participatory MEL:** Designing processes that capture living, relational dynamics—like network trust, local agency, and ecosystem health.
2. **Evidence Translation:** Creating practical tools and templates that turn rich, complex learning into clear insights, credible proof of systemic impact, and strategic narratives for boards and wider audiences.

By holding both sides of this equation, evaluation ceases to be a top-down compliance tax or a superficial story. Instead, it becomes a valuable tool for learning and decision-making — meeting accountability needs while staying true to the complex, relationship-driven nature of systemic change.

A Collaborative Sandbox for Field-Building

To integrate systemic and participatory approaches to MEL with accountability demands, we have developed our Methodology for Credible Claims in Complexity, serving as a shared scaffolding to align relational data with high-level governance.



Unity Effect has furthermore established a suite of open-source frameworks, tools, and diagnostic scorecards—including the *Impact Garden*, the *Capacity Compass*, and quantitative *Systemic Scorecards* (see attached PDF resource), rooted in:

- **Field-Tested Practice:** Implemented with partners including SEND e.V. (funded by Google.org), the Network of European Foundations (NEF), and Circle Generation (funded by Small Foundation).
- **Facilitated Peer Learning:** Backed by deep experience hosting our own participatory learning programs (such as The Regenerative Signal) and peer-learning spaces with international partners like GIZ and the ILO.
- **A Global Movement:** Supported by our global Community of Practice spanning 250+ active members across 39 countries.

The Invitation: What We Will Build Together

We invite a select cohort of up to 12 funding organisations to step into this sandbox together. Over 6 months, we will adapt our open-source frameworks and tools to your live portfolios, co-design board-friendly evaluation tools, and co-author a public sector report (The Future of Funder MEL) to shift the broader philanthropic landscape.

The Lab's Architecture: Four Connected Building Blocks

To bridge ground-level relational learning with high-level board accountability, the Lab integrates four distinct program components delivered as one coherent experience. Each participating team receives:

1. Internal Capacity Building (*The Regenerative Signal Programme*)

Your representatives will take part in five live learning sessions, exploring new ways to think about and approach evaluation. This programme is designed to build internal fluency in systemic, complexity-aware evaluation. Your team will explore functional alternatives to linear models and learn how to track critical, qualitative drivers of impact like inner capacity, network resilience, and team vitality.

2. Tool Development & Peer Exchange (*Co-Creative Lab*)

Running alongside the training, this module provides a peer space to work through active portfolio challenges. Working with other funder teams and senior evaluation experts, we will co-create practical, ready-to-use tools and templates to measure power-sharing, trust, and systemic progress.

3. Direct Implementation Support (*Bespoke Coaching & Internal Report*)

To ensure these approaches successfully take root internally, your organisation is paired with a senior evaluator from our network for **3 to 4 private coaching sessions**. This dedicated support will help your team review current reporting requirements, strengthen existing approaches, and work through the specific needs of your organisation, leadership and board. This process culminates in a customized institutional summary brief, a report for your organization documenting your adapted evaluation framework, customized indicators, and board translation tools.

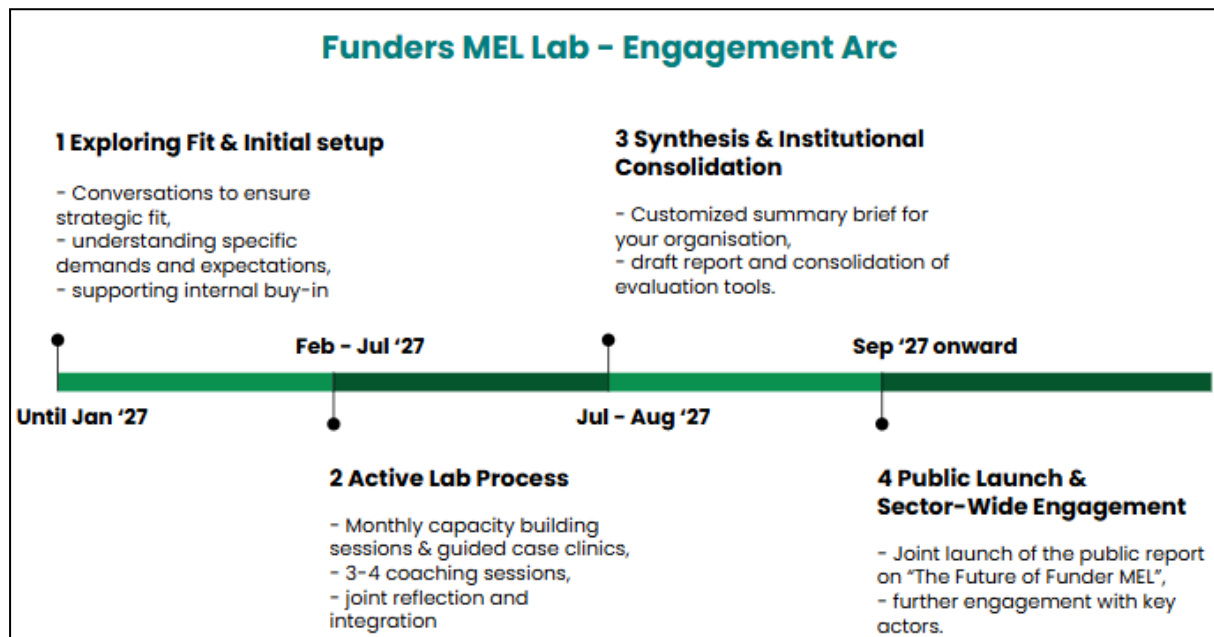
4. Wider Field Building & Leadership (*Public Report*)

Following the active learning track, the cohort's insights and developed templates will be consolidated into a **public report: The Future of Funder MEL: Bridging Accountability, Systemic Impact, and Relational Learning**. Launching in September 2027, this co-authored publication provides the wider sector with a concrete pathway to shift their approach to evaluation, positioning your organisation as a visible leader in this transition.

These four building blocks unfold across a structured 6-month engagement arc designed to fit into your team's ongoing operational rhythm.

Your Concrete Journey: The Lab process

The Funders MEL Lab is designed as a journey that bridges ground-level relational learning with high-level strategic advice. Spanning four distinct phases from pre-cohort alignment to public sector leadership, this engagement arc provides your team with tailored coaching, peer co-creation, and concrete tools. The core phase is the Active Lab Process, which requires three hours per month per participant while creating lasting institutional capability.



Phase I: Exploring Fit & Initial Setup

(Pre-Cohort: Autumn 2026 – January 2027)

Before the active cohort begins, we engage in a mutual sense-making process to ensure alignment between the Lab's scaffolding, your portfolio timing, and your internal governance requirements. This includes:

- **Mutual sense-making call:** An exploratory conversation to map your current MEL challenges, expectations for the Lab, and determine strategic fit. This can include further conversations and exchange with your MEL colleagues or leadership.
- **Team seat mapping:** Allocating up to three program seats per organization, ideally bringing together MEL leads, program managers, or executive leadership to foster cross-departmental alignment.
- **Senior evaluator matchmaking:** Pairing your team with a dedicated senior evaluator from our network whose thematic and methodological expertise matches your portfolio focus.

Phase 2: The Active Lab Process

(February – July 2027)

Over five months, your team participates in a structured rhythm of live cohort learning, applied prototyping, and bespoke coaching, requiring three hours per month per participant while building lasting institutional capacity. This includes:

- **Monthly capacity building session (*The Regenerative Signal*):** Five 90-minute live interactive training sessions designed to build internal fluency in systemic, complexity-aware evaluation and functional alternatives to linear logframes.
- **Monthly guided case clinic (*Co-Creative Lab*):** Four 90-minute peer sandbox sessions to unpack live portfolio challenges, understand shared needs for evaluation tools, and pressure-test different evaluation methods.
- **Private coaching sessions:** 3 to 4 dedicated 1-on-1 coaching sessions with your assigned senior evaluator to review existing reporting processes, adapt frameworks directly to your grantmaking, and navigate internal dynamics.
- **Joint reflection & integration session:** A dedicated final cohort session at the end of July focused on harvesting collective insights, reviewing prototyped tools, and further clarifying your ongoing institutional implementation roadmap.

Phase 3: Consolidation & Custom Reporting

(July – August 2027)

Following the active lab, we consolidate your team's ground-level learning into concrete organizational artifacts and finalize the sector-wide publication draft. This includes:

- **Customized institutional summary brief:** A tailored report for your organization documenting your adapted evaluation framework, customized indicators, and board translation tools developed during the Lab.
- **Editorial harvest:** Synthesizing cohort tools, case studies, and qualitative frameworks into a comprehensive draft for the public sector report.

Phase 4: Public Launch & Field Leadership

(September 2027 Onward)

We position your organization as a visible pioneer through a coordinated public launch and ongoing sector engagement. This includes:

- **Public report launch:** Official release of *"The Future of Funder MEL: Bridging Accountability, Systemic Impact, and Relational Learning"*.
- **Co-authorship & sector visibility:** Featuring your organization's logo, case study (if desired), and co-authorship credit in a high-impact publication presented across international funder networks.

An Invitation to Co-Create

Shaping the Future of Funder MEL Together

We are inviting a focused cohort of progressive funding organisations, encompassing foundations, systemic impact investors, public funds, and participatory networks, to step into this journey together. To ensure deep peer exchange, cross-institutional learning, and tailored coaching support, participation is intentionally limited to 12 organisations.

Applications open in September 2026 for the active cohort journey running from February through July 2027.

Participation Investment

The investment for full institutional participation is between **€8,000–12,000 per funding organisation** (depending on organizational capacity and engagement details). This includes:

- **3 Program Seats:** Access for up to 3 team members to the 5-session Regenerative Signal capacity building training.
- **Applied Co-Creative Lab:** Dedicated peer sandbox sessions to co-design and pressure-test tailored tools against live portfolio needs.
- **Direct Private Coaching:** 3 to 4 private coaching sessions with a senior evaluator to navigate your specific internal or board demands.
- **Customized Summary Brief:** A tailored institutional report documenting your organization's adapted evaluation framework, customized indicators, and board translation tools for internal governance.
- **Field Leadership & Co-Authorship:** Co-authorship status, institutional feature, and logo placement in the public sector report (The Future of Funder MEL) launching September 2027.

Next Steps: Explore Fit & Alignment

We view enrollment as a mutual sense-making process to ensure this cohort aligns with your current institutional goals and portfolio timing.

Use this [link to book a private, 30-minute introductory conversation](#) with our team, reach out to us directly:

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