

# Towards a Changemaker Impact Standard

This concept note argues for a new quality management standard for social impact. The standard applies to all organizations, whether commercial, public sector, civil society, or scientific. It incentivizes collaboration to solve our biggest societal problems, the ones that cannot be solved by single point interventions. Systemic problems require a collaborative approach to setting goals, planning, doing, measuring and learning. This proposal offers a way to get out of a century-deep rut of competing for inputs (such as finance) and move effectively into collaborating for impact through the tool of quality management certification at the ecosystem level.

Please share your comments with David Bonbright ([dbonbright@ashoka.org](mailto:dbonbright@ashoka.org))

## Executive Summary

### Unlock the Future of Social Impact with the Changemaker Impact Standard

#### A New Era of Impact Management

Today's biggest societal challenges—climate change, poverty, inequality, disease, and polarization—cannot be solved with single-point interventions. Systemic problems require systemic solutions, built on collaboration, alignment, and shared accountability.

The **Changemaker Impact Standard (CIS)** is a revolutionary quality management framework designed to drive real social impact across businesses, public sector entities, civil society, and scientific organizations.

#### The Problem:

Traditional impact measurement tools are backward-looking, compliance-heavy, and ineffective at predicting or accelerating change.

#### The Solution:

CIS shifts the focus from measuring past activities to **certifying changemaker capabilities**—the key drivers of collaboration, innovation, and impact within an organization and across ecosystems. By leveraging an adapted ISO quality management framework, CIS empowers organizations to measure what matters and improve what drives change.

#### Why the Changemaker Impact Standard?

- **Move Beyond Compliance** – Unlike traditional monitoring and evaluation, CIS is forward-looking, providing predictive insights into an organization's ability to drive impact.
- **Leverage a Globally Recognized Model** – Built on the trusted ISO management system framework, CIS integrates changemaker capabilities into a proven structure used by organizations worldwide.
- **Foster Ecosystem Alignment** – CIS ensures that organizations and stakeholders work together effectively to common goals while measuring progress holistically.
- **Democratize Impact Certification** – With CIS, every stakeholder contributes to assessment, turning impact measurement into an inclusive, collaborative process.

- **Harness AI & Digital Innovation** – Generative AI and mobile technology eliminate outdated compliance burdens, making impact measurement seamless, scalable, and actionable.

#### How It Works

CIS transforms the way organizations assess and enhance their effectiveness:

1. **Stakeholder-Led Certification** – Every stakeholder in the system provides real-time feedback on witnessed behaviors and organizational capabilities.
2. **AI-Driven Analysis** – Generative AI synthesizes data to generate insights, trends, and improvement pathways.
3. **Real-Time Performance Tracking** – Organizations receive ongoing guidance and recommendations to strengthen collaboration and impact effectiveness.
4. **Changemaker Maturity Index** – A dynamic scoring system provides a clear view of organizational alignment, efficiency, and impact potential.

#### Powered by Deep Fathom's Model

The Changemaker Impact Standard builds upon Deep Fathom's pioneering stakeholder-driven auditing framework, ensuring **360-degree accountability** and **continual learning**. Through real-time insights and participatory evaluation, organizations gain actionable strategies to strengthen their management systems, collaboration networks, and social impact performance.

#### The Future of Social Impact Starts Now

By rapidly scaling the adoption of the **Changemaker Impact Standard**, we can accelerate progress on solving the world's most pressing problems. Our vision is a world where every organization is equipped with the capabilities to drive systemic change—where **everyone is a changemaker**.

#### Join Us

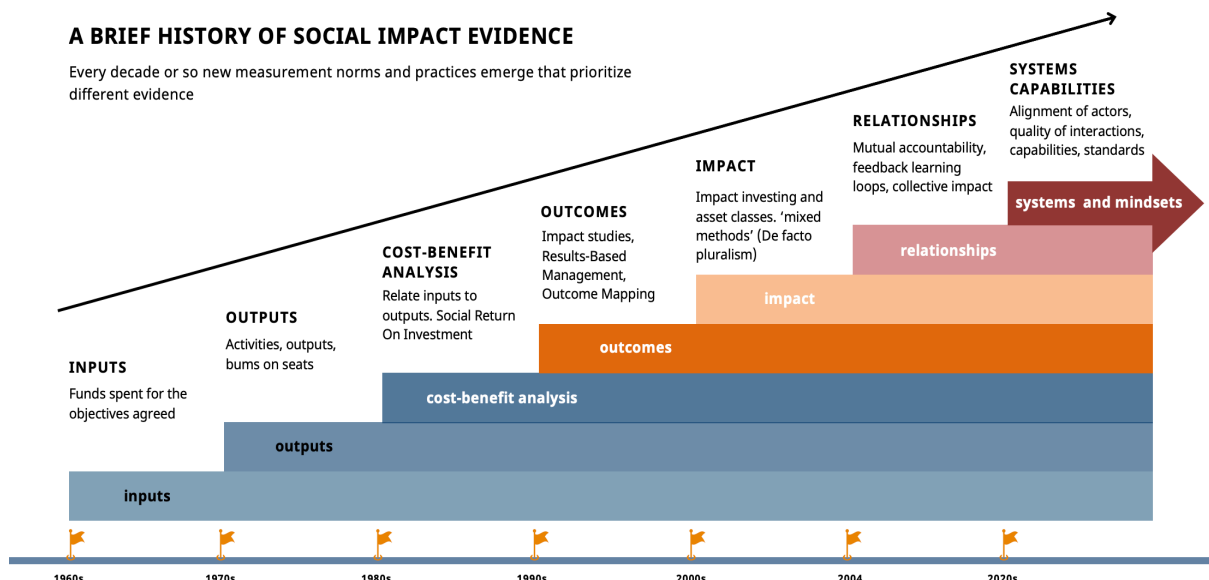
We invite forward-thinking organizations, investors, and changemakers to be part of this global transformation. Whether you're looking to **certify your organization**, **partner in this initiative**, or **explore funding opportunities through Changemaker Funds**, we're eager to collaborate. Let's redefine impact management—together.

## Background & rationale

**If you cannot measure something, you cannot manage it effectively.** The Changemaker Impact Standard (CIS) is grounded in new and better measures for solving societal problems.

In order to understand the CIS measurement model, we begin by reviewing the history of impact measurement. The illustration below highlights the historical progression of ideas that became measurement practice norms. It shows the stages of what were in effect the norms of 'good evidence' over decades, and what choices those norms were meant to support. In other words, they show, for each stage, what evidence is most valued in decision-making for impact.

Since the early 2000s, we began a paradigmatic transition from a linear logic of impact based on reductionist thinking to a systems thinking logic of impact. This transition is in its early stages, with most organizations measuring and funding impact still using only on linear logic.



In addition to understanding how evidence norms have changed, looking across fifty years of questing for 'good evidence' invites us to use a wider lens that embraces the whole organizational management system and how it performs not only for the organization but for the larger ecosystem that it is part of. It invites us to look closely at the relationship between organizational capabilities, performance, and results (aka, outcomes).

**In any living system, the quality of interactions determine outcomes.** Capabilities are the optimal variable to measure to shape the quality of interactions and therefore should be the focus of efforts to create an effective evidence-based model to accelerate the results we want, and especially to allow all actors in a system – **different parts within organizations and across the actors that make up the ecosystem – to understand their unique roles and contributions to solve the systemic nature of the problems.**

## A model to measure management systems

The conventional tools for accountability in the “impact space” of monitoring and evaluation are essentially backward looking. They tell us what happened yesterday, not what will happen tomorrow. To get to predictive indicators, we need new tools that show us the current capabilities and behaviors in the system. In other words, we need tools to measure the quality of management systems.

Fortunately, we do not need to invent a tool for this. There is, in the ISO management quality standards field, a universally recognized and globally distributed and applied model for certifying the quality of management systems in any country, any sector, and any organisation.<sup>1</sup>

**The biggest measurement opportunity for accelerating social impact is to build changemaker capabilities into the ISO management system framework. To do this Ashoka is creating a [global Changemaker Impact Standard \(CIS\)](#).**

The strategic benefit of leveraging the ISO model is obvious. Instead of persuading organizations to do something new, we offer them a better way to do something they already do.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the industrial standardization processes core to ISO are different from the processes we need to tackle our most significant societal challenges – like climate change, poverty, inequality, disease, and polarization. It is our argument, however, [that the ISO model can be readily adapted for the impact space; this note sets out how.](#)

As explained further below, new information technologies, particularly generative AI, allow us to cut through and automate the often tedious and over-wrought compliance models for ISO standards developed for industrial production.<sup>3</sup>

Certification of a quality management standard based on the capabilities required to solve tough problems is both an end and a means of impact. Impact is optimized when empowered actors across an ecosystem work in alignment to realize a common objective or goal. Alignment for impact is a product of what political scientists call [soft power, the shaping of behavior through appeal and attraction rather than force or money.](#) If we could solve complex societal problems by ‘command and control’ or the ‘market mechanism’ they would have long been solved. In complex human systems we need to come to common agreement about the goal and then, over time, align to meet that goal.

[As rare it is, agreeing goals is the easy part. Realizing the partnerships, roles, and structures to realize the goals is the difficult part.](#) The way to do this must fit the new strategic reality of a world defined by increasing rates of change and interdependence. In today’s reality, we want as many people as possible – aspirationally, everyone – [to have the capabilities required to align and contribute to agreed common goals.](#) Ashoka calls these [changemaker capabilities](#). Selecting for and building these capabilities form the heart of quality management

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<sup>1</sup> The three main families of standards are ISO 9000 (quality management system), ISO 14000 (environmental management system), and ISO 45000 (occupational safety and health). They exist under **ISO Annex SL**, a standardized framework used for the development and alignment of ISO management system standards (MSS).

<sup>2</sup> There are over two million organizations worldwide seeking ISO certifications each year and a strong global infrastructure of ISO certification bodies that are primed to become CIS certifiers.

<sup>3</sup> A wave of impact oriented AI start ups are disrupting the audit and compliance industry. E.g., [Deep Fathom](#).

The Changemaker Impact Standard provides a way to organize and manage using changemaker capabilities. It measures these capabilities by inviting every actor in the system to give witness to the behaviors that they experience directly. **Every actor is an assessor**. This flips the traditional model of industrial management audit on its head. In that model, expert auditors enter the system and collect evidence of compliance. In our changemaker impact certification model, everyone is an assessor, everyone has a voice, everyone is a changemaker.

This ‘everyone’ feature is only possible and affordable due to today’s near universal distribution of mobile phones, combined with generative AI. The importance of these technologies for the full realization of human freedom and self-governance cannot be overstated. We now have affordable tools to assess organizational performance in a way that gives everyone – especially those most affected by the problems being addressed – a meaningful voice in the assessments. It transforms the extractive aspects of surveys and polls into closed feedback-based learning loops of iterative improvement in attaining agreed goals.

To sum up, the Changemaker Impact Standard enshrines capabilities for equitable relationships (e.g., **mutuality, agency, fairness, and voice**), collaboration across organizations addressing a problem, and alignment around agreed goals. This is AI-driven digital certification where everyone is an assessor, and agency (what Ashoka calls changemaking) is both a means and an end.<sup>4</sup>

## The Deep Fathom changemaker capability certification model and platform

For the first stage of its development, the Changemaker Impact Standard draws on Deep Fathom’s model. The Deep Fathom model democratizes auditing by enabling every stakeholder (called “auditees” in **Figure 1**) – from employees to suppliers to communities – to contribute to the assessment, as indicated in Step 2 in **Figure 1**.

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<sup>4</sup> Sen, A. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Alfred Knoff; 1999. Evans. P. Collective capabilities, culture, and Amartya Sen’s Development as Freedom. *St Comp Int Dev* 37, 54060 (2002) (<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02686261>). This proposal builds on Sen’s work in the way Evans’ article called for in its conclusion, “Sen’s capability approach provides an invaluable analytical and philosophical foundation for those interested in pursuing development as freedom, but it is a foundation that must be built on, not just admired.”

Figure 1

## The Achilles heel of ISO, FCA, & ESG auditing.

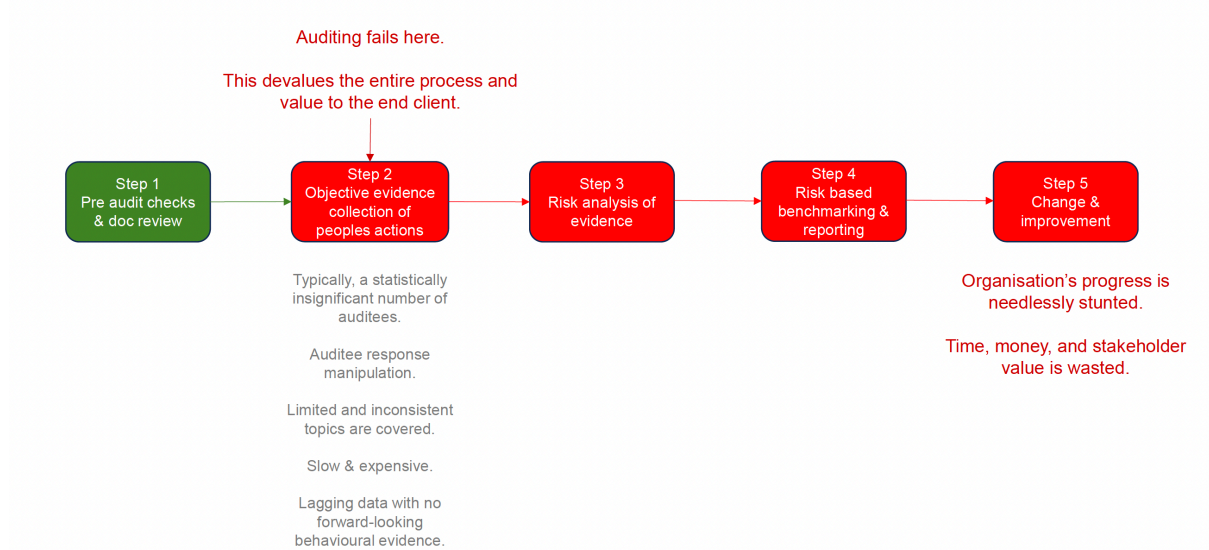
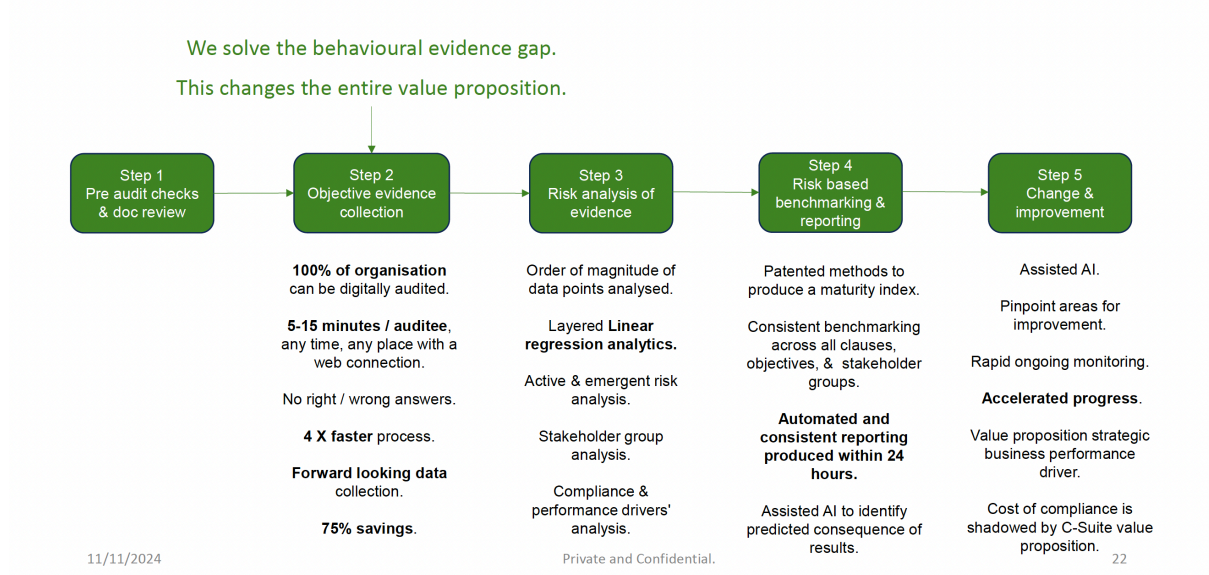


Figure 2 elaborates how Deep Fathom solves the behavioral evidence gap and transforms the audit experience.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2

## Patented next generation auditing solution.

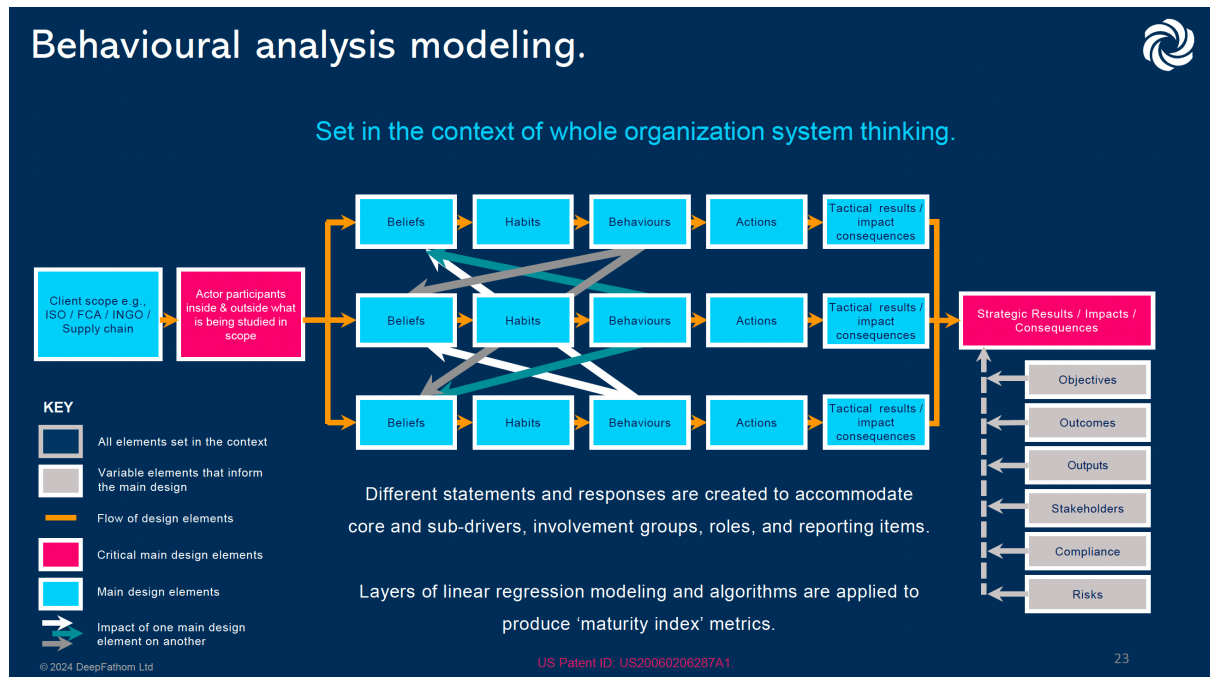


<sup>5</sup> [This article](#) in the Chartered Quality Institute magazine by Chief Product Officer at DeepFathom Ian Rosam makes the case for measuring behavior.



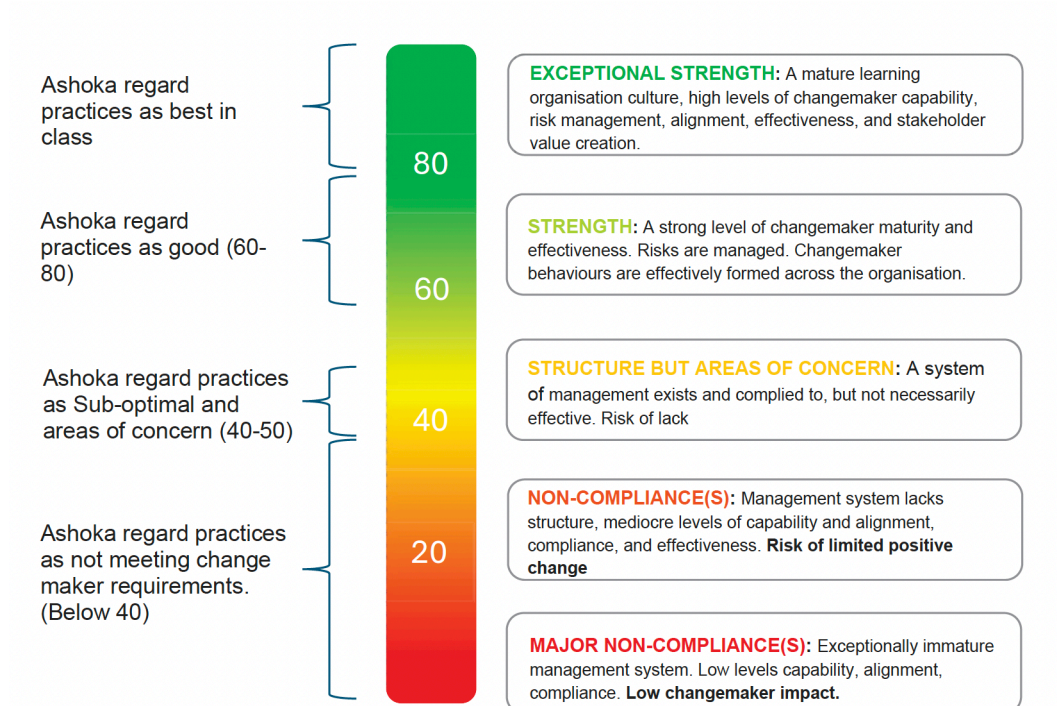
**Figure 3** expands on the underlying analysis used to capture observed behaviors from stakeholders and map them onto changemaker capabilities and results.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 4** explains how observed behaviors turn into scores on the management system risk maturity index.

**Figure 4**

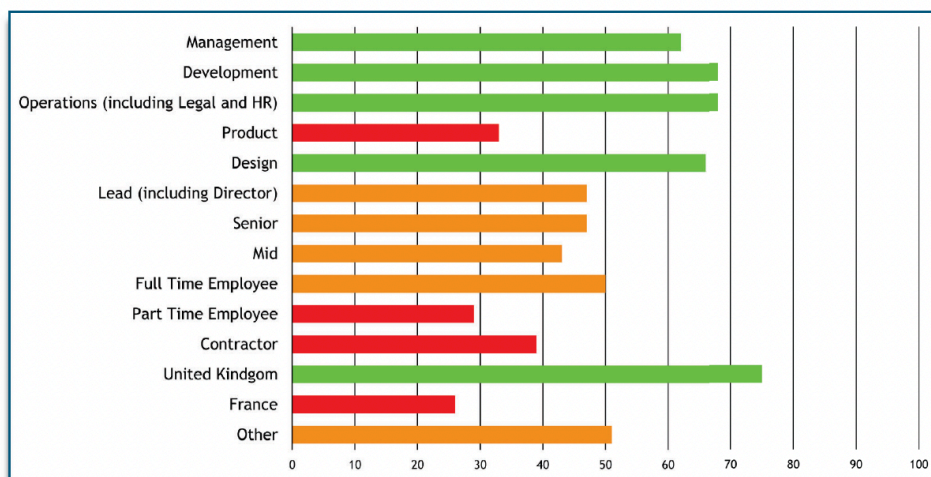
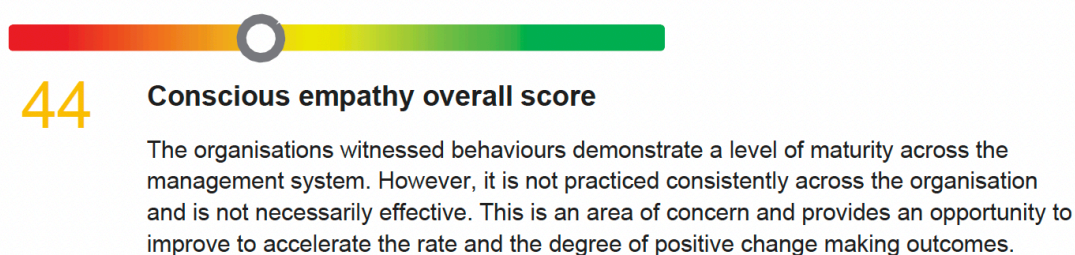


**Figure 5** is a score from a mock report that breaks out the overall score for empathy by the involvement groups. Involvement groups are co-created with each client during the scoping phase that precedes the five audit steps in Figures 1 and 2. Involvement groups are defined with the client to optimize data disaggregation and comparison. Categories frequently used include function, role, location, gender, educational level, and language. The context drives involvement group design.

Please note the scores show the behaviours those involvement groups are witnessing; the root cause of the witnessed behaviour may originate from other areas of the management system.

Reports also do this for the other three main changemaker capability sets: teamwork, leadership, and practicing changemaking.

**Figure 5**



Reports also provides details for sub-capabilities, **Figure 6** is an example of a score for openness, a sub-capability of empathy. The purple italic text are guides for the certifier to build out custom recommendations.

Sub-capability scores can also be analyzed by the involvement groups illustrated in **Figure 5**. This is not done in the written reports as it would make them overly tedious. An important feature of the of the platform is an account that allows the organization to analyze its data at every level of detail and data disaggregation, right down to individual assessment question answers.



Figure 6



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**Openness: Willingness to experience new ideas and be open to different perspectives.**

The firm's witnessed behaviours demonstrate a strong level of maturity.

Openness behaviours are effectively expressed in changemaking practices across the organisation. Policies are communicated, objectives set, outcomes measured, issues are logged, discussed, with changes and improvements implemented and measured.

*What is the consequence of effective openness behaviours across the organisation, good and bad?*

*What would be expected to happen as openness practices strengthen Verizon as a learning organisation?*

*Base your comments on referenced research or case studies whenever possible.*

## Invitation

By rapidly scaling the adoption of the Changemaker Impact Standard, we can accelerate progress on solving the world's most pressing societal problems. Our vision is a world in which we have unlocked our full potential – everyone a changemaker – to learn, adapt, and affect meaningful change at the societal level. Collaboration is intrinsic and essential in this endeavor, and we are committed to working alongside all partners who share this vision.

We welcome the opportunity to discuss this initiative further and explore how we can collectively contribute to a more resilient and equitable future.

For those who find this compelling, we would like to also share one way to organize funding using the CIS called Changemaker Funds. Please let us know if you would like to learn more about Changemaker Funds.

## Overview: Changemaker Impact Standard

This overview describes the capabilities included in the Changemaker Impact Standard. The unit of analysis for this set of capabilities is the management system of an organization that is funding and/or implementing work for societal progress and seeking to solve or remediate social or environmental problems. The organization management system as unit of analysis recognizes that effective action for good necessarily involves intentional relationships with multiple organizations and other stakeholders. These are referred to in the capability statements below as collaborations.

### Learning, improvement, and results orientation

The organization learns and demonstrably improves how it achieves agreed results

- Actors across ecosystem align to agreed goals
- People and communities served willingly engage with the organization or collaboration
- Resilience: the organization has the ability to adapt and withstand shocks
- Inclusive: the organization demonstrates the ability to become more inclusive
- The organization is sensitive to issues affecting minorities (e.g. based on gender, race, etc.)
- The organization collaborates effectively
- The organization understands how its intended outcomes for the communities and individuals served change over time and has effectively communicated how it contributes to those outcomes
- The organization demonstrates its ability to improve

### Leadership and culture (values, norms, behaviours, competence, communications)

Leaders and managers cultivate a culture of mutuality and purpose within the organization and with collaborators

- The organization strengthens the agency of internal and external stakeholders
- Subsidiarity: decision-making is located as close as possible to those directly affected
- Listening is a core value, underwritten by conscious empathy
- Leaders and managers communicate decisions effectively
- Leaders and managers keep their promises
- Leaders and managers honor the values of the organization
- Leaders create other leaders
- Strategy, use of funds, and approach to partnering are transparent
- The organization or collaboration communicates its work publicly in ways that allow society at large to assess it and learn from its experience
- The inherent power dynamics in the organization and its collaborations are understood and managed to achieve greater mutuality
- Relationships with stakeholders are equitable
- Technical competence is a core value

### Accountability, monitoring, and reporting

Accountability, monitoring, and reporting contribute to effectiveness, collaboration, and collective learning

- All stakeholders are accountable
- Stakeholder feedback leads to improvement actions
- Orientation to understand community feedback is well evidenced
- Communications and reports amongst collaborating organizations and units within organizations are mutually responsive

- Monitoring and reporting (structured evidence) lead to improvement actions
- Impact monitoring derives from stakeholder participation
- Reports on outcomes, impact, and accountability are transparent and available to all stakeholders
- Funders meet costs of accountability, monitoring, and reporting

#### Equitable agreement processes & operational systems

Agreement processes & operational systems optimize equitable collaborations

- Understands partner context
- Respects partner priorities
- Supports partner wants
- Allocates risk equitably
- Adapts to changes in context and operating assumptions
- Effective complaints procedures
- Funders meet costs to form grant agreements

#### Financial support & systems

Financial arrangements maximize organizational effectiveness and adaptability

- Funding provided is adequate to meet agreed implementation activities plus any reporting and accountability requirements in the funding agreement
- Payments are phased so that recipients do not suffer related cash flow challenges
- Funding covers correlated general and core costs
- Funding is designed to be able to adapt to changing contexts

#### Capacity strengthening & protection

Capacity strengthening and resource allocations are aligned to agreed objectives and fairly distribute risks across collaborating organizations

- Implementers participate in the design, selection, implementation, and evaluation of capacity strengthening activities
- Capabilities for resource mobilization, measurement, evaluation, and improvement orientation are recognized in the collaboration
- Risks are shared fairly across stakeholders and risk allocations are included in formal agreements

#### Systems change (root causes, systems capabilities, alignment)

Collaborations address root causes and change systems to achieve better outcomes

- The theory of change addresses root causes
- The theory of change is shared and agreed across the collaboration
- Operational processes for continual learning are in place and evidence is used to make changes
- The inherent power dynamics in the organization and its collaboration are understood and managed to achieve greater mutuality

### **Changemaker Impact Standard Maturity Index**

**80-100:** High level of management system maturity. Clear demonstration of continual feedback, change, improvement, collaboration, high-quality relationships, and likelihood of outcome attainment. Low levels of risk. High levels of alignment, enhanced performance effectiveness, efficiency, and value creation.

**60-79:** A basic level of management system maturity across key performance drivers. Modest levels of risk and basic evidence of effective processes, efficiencies, and value creation.

**40-59:** Indicates management systems immaturity of operational alignment, low levels of effective processes, increased risk, low efficiency, and weak value creation.

**20-39:** Low level of management system maturity, serious risk to organizational effectiveness, productivity, and value creation.

**0-19:** Exceptionally low level of management system maturity, extreme risk to organizational effectiveness, productivity, and value creation.