

Rethinking How We Measure Change

BALANCING ACCOUNTABILITY AND COMMUNITY MEANING

SUMMARY

This article discusses common tension in development work: the need for measurable indicators and accountability, alongside the deeper signs of change that communities value and experience. Highlighted are three innovative approaches that bring these worlds together:

- **Data Gardens**, where communities visually represent progress;
- **community-led digital tools** like Kobo, which strengthen rigor and ownership of data; and,
- the **Common Scale of Progress**, which tracks social and behavioral transformation over time.

Development actors operate in two worlds at once. On one side, there is the need for measurable indicators, logframes, compliance requirements, and accountability to donors and the public. These systems require numbers: enrollment rates, participation levels, by-laws passed, income increases, or reductions in harmful practices.

On the other side, there is the lived experience of communities — the shifts in confidence, trust, dignity, relationships, and decision-making power that are often the true drivers of sustainable change. These transformations are not always easily captured in standard reporting formats.

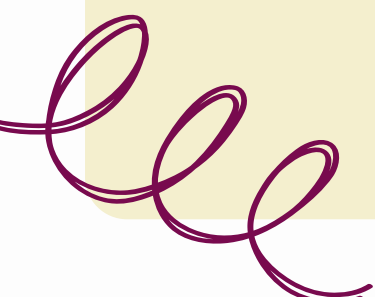
Colmeal sits at the intersection of these two realities. Rather than choosing between measurable indicators and meaningful community experience, the approach seeks to hold both.

TENSION: INDICATORS VS. LIVED CHANGE

An overemphasis on externally defined indicators can unintentionally:

- Reduce complex social change to numbers
- Shift ownership of measurement away from communities
- Overlook relational and behavioral shifts
- Create reporting systems that communities do not relate to

The challenge is not whether to measure — but how to measure in ways that preserve meaning, ownership, and accountability simultaneously.



THE COLMEAL RESPONSE: COMMUNITY-OWNED EVIDENCE

Colmeal is built on the belief that communities are not only actors of change, but also interpreters of change. The approach balances formal indicators with locally meaningful signs of change through:

1. Community-Defined Priorities and Indicators: Rather than imposing indicators from the outset, Colmeal facilitates community dialogue to identify:

- What problems matter most
- What change would look like
- How they would know if progress is happening

Formal indicators (e.g., school enrollment rates, reduced alcohol spending, participation numbers) are linked to community priorities, not detached from them. This ensures compliance requirements are aligned with lived realities.

2. Community-led and Owned Data Collection: Communities gather their own data using accessible tools — household surveys, community mapping, observation and group discussions. Because the data comes from their own analysis, it becomes meaningful evidence rather than external reporting.

Some examples of data that has been gathered and analyzed by communities practicing Colmeal include:

- Calculating annual alcohol spending compared to school fees
- Counting children out of school
- Tracking by-law compliance

Numbers are not abstract — they are directly connected to decision-making.

WHAT DO INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO DATA COLLECTION LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE? (3 EXAMPLES)

1



PHOTO: ADRA KENYA, LOKUDULE VILLAGE

Data Gardens: A Data Garden is a physical, visual representation of community data and signs of change. Using natural materials — rocks, plants, pathways, symbols — communities create installations that represent:

- Key indicators (e.g., number of children in school)
- Milestones (e.g., by-laws passed)
- Behavioral changes (e.g., reduction in alcohol use)
- Qualitative shifts (e.g., increased youth leadership)



PHOTO: ADRA KENYA, LOKUDULE VILLAGE

For example:

- Each rock may represent a child enrolled in school.
- A growing plant may symbolize a new initiative.
- A pathway may represent progress over time.

These gardens serve multiple purposes:

- Accountability: They publicly display progress.
- Transparency: Visitors can see and discuss the data.
- Ownership: The community interprets and explains its own indicators.
- Learning: Other communities can visit and exchange ideas.

2

Community-Led Digital Data Collection (e.g., Kobo): Some communities may also choose to use accessible digital tools such as Kobo to collect and manage data.

Community members conduct household surveys, track key indicators, and generate evidence in real time. This strengthens both rigor and ownership:

- Data is reliable
- Communities remain the primary producers and interpreters of evidence
- Technology becomes a tool for empowerment, not extraction

Digital monitoring helps bridge local priorities with institutional accountability requirements.



PHOTO: SALANGA, PHILIPPINES

3

The Common Scale of Progress: Capturing Transformation Over Time

Many of the most important changes communities experience are gradual — such as increased confidence, reduced harmful practices, or stronger leadership.

Colmeal's Common Scale of Progress helps communities and partners track these shifts over time through shared stages of change. The Common Scale helps organizations see and aggregate progress across diverse communities, partners, or grantees without forcing them into the standardized indicators or tools.

This allows progress to be:

- Comparable across contexts
- Meaningful to communities
- More reflective of real transformation than "yes/no" indicators alone

The scale provides a bridge between qualitative experience and structured reporting.



Salanga is a collaborative social enterprise providing tools and training in community-led development and MEAL to organizations globally. We co-create solutions to measure impact meaningfully and ensure data is used to drive decisions.


We are a global team with diverse experience, grounded in our shared values.

We believe in inclusive, equity-based, and data-driven approaches, which underpin all the work we do with our partners. Together we're contributing to a global movement to share power and make development more effective and lasting.



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