

# Equitable Approaches to Evaluation

Learnings about concepts, applications  
and capacity from the literature and  
virtual workshops

This report summarizes the learnings of a project led by Maritt Kirst & Ciann Wilson (Co-Directors) and Sharmalene Mendis-Millard (Former Associate Director) of the Centre for Community Research, Learning and Action (CCRLA), located at Wilfrid Laurier University's Waterloo, Ontario main campus.

Thank you to Research Assistants Ruth Cameron, Nicole Burns, Rajni Sharma, and Oeishi Faruquzzaman. Sharmalene and Oeishi prepared this report, while Ruth contributed the literature review.

**About CCRLA:** We conduct community-engaged research and evaluation and create experiential higher education learning opportunities that prioritize social justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion for overall community well-being. Visit <http://wlu.ca/ccrla>.

***We would like to acknowledge our deepest gratitude to the Indigenous stewards of the territories on which we learn and do this work.***

*Wilfrid Laurier University and its campuses are located on the Haldimand Tract, the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee peoples. This land is part of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty, symbolizing the agreement to share & protect our resources, & not to engage in conflict.*

This work was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connections Grant and is done in partnership with the Ontario Trillium Foundation. One of our strategic goals of this partnership is to work with partners to increase the capacity of the non-profit sector to measure & articulate their impact through the application of an equity lens.

Reference: CCRLA 2023. Equitable Approaches to Evaluation: Learnings about concepts, application & capacity from the Literature and Virtual Workshops. Waterloo, ON: Centre for Community Research, Learning and Action (CCRLA), Wilfrid Laurier University.



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## Background

Given the growing demands for evidence-based decision making and outcome-based funding combined with funding cuts and/or limited funding options, non-profit and community-based organization need to clearly articulate and demonstrate their impact on society. There is thus an increased need for non-profits to conduct effective program evaluations. However, there is a lack of capacity to fulfill these expectations. This results in a need for evaluation capacity building (Labin et al., 2012). Additionally, the non-profit sector has suffered significant economic losses during COVID-19 which has resulted in further need for evidence of impact and the need for evaluation capacity building (ONN, 2020).

For many non-profit organizations (and public sector agencies) providing services to vulnerable and marginalized populations, equity issues are integral to their work, thus making the need for equitable approaches to program evaluation essential. Recent years have seen an increase in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) requirements in policy and practice. This shift was made possible with social justice movements and calls to action including:

- Idle No More movement (2012)
- Black Lives Matter movement (2013)
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action (2015)
- Racial reckoning (2020)

However, concrete practices or meaningful ways to embed equity into program evaluation are still unclear, and the capacity to do so is limited, especially in the non-profit sector.

## What is equitable evaluation?

There are several different definitions of equitable evaluation. Differing definitions can contribute to difficulties in establishing guidelines or best practices on how to embed equity into the evaluation process. Some definitions focus on embedding equity as an outcome in evaluation, while others focus on how to make the process of evaluation more equitable. Definitions of equitable evaluation include:

- "... seeks to help mission-driven organizations naming equity or racial equity as their strategic end to use every asset, including evaluation, in service of that aim." (Associations Advancing Equitable Evaluation Practices, 2019)
- "An equitable evaluation lens includes... an assessment of influence / decision making power." (The Center for Evaluation Innovation, 2021)
- Public Policy Associates (2015) defines a culturally responsive racial equity lens as a tool that can be utilized in facilitating comprehensive change
- The Equitable Evaluation Initiative (2020) has developed a framework for evaluation which provides guiding principles for evaluators to reflect on beliefs, assumptions, and preconceptions, and recalibrate the work they engage in. In work preceding the Equitable Evaluation Initiative, the founders defined equity-focused evaluation as assessing the "relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability – and, in humanitarian settings, coverage, connectedness, and coherence – of policies, programs, and projects concerned with achieving equitable development results." (Dean-Coffey et al, 2014).
- Determining "how an intervention may contribute to or resist replication of existing inequities within this context, including the possibility that it may have different effects for different populations." (Inouye et al., 2005)

As some of these definitions indicate, part of the process of embedding equity into evaluation is facilitating a shift in decision making power. As a result, investigation into decolonized evaluation is also relevant to equitable evaluation. Johnston-Goodstar (2012) has defined decolonized evaluation as “centered in Indigenous values and goals...centering Indigenous worldviews, actively including Indigenous participation, and focusing on relevance as defined by Indigenous communities.”

## Purpose of Workshops

To address a gap in practical knowledge on how to build capacity to conduct equitable evaluation, we planned two knowledge workshops to begin conversations and form a network for **co-creating a framework of guiding principles, protocols, and tool options to advance equitable evaluation practices for the Ontario context**. Besides providing a platform for cross-sectoral knowledge sharing, these workshops helped to form new, and deepen existing partnerships. The workshop explored the following questions:

1. What can we do to make evaluation practices and process more equitable?
2. What can we do to understand whether programs being evaluated are achieving equitable outcomes for the populations they intend to serve?

The workshops had with the following learning objectives:

- To deepen understanding of the evaluation capacity needs of non-profit organizations to engage in equitable, community-based research approaches to evaluation so they may effectively assess and communicate their impacts.
- To identify the resources and expertise to meet the needs of non-profit organizations and evaluators conducting evaluations.

To meet these objectives, a Steering Committee guiding the workshop planning identified a number of people that fell into one or more of the following categories:

- Not-for-profits (small and large)
- Funders
- Evaluators
- Evaluation capacity builders
- Academics who conduct evaluations and/or who have expertise in community based social justice research and equity issues

Our aim in this ongoing work is to establish evidence-based understandings of what capacity for sound, ethical and equitable program evaluation entails for the non-profit sector. That understanding will inform the development of evaluation capacity building activities to equip non-profits with practical strategies and tools to better address their program evaluation needs.

The long-term intention is to continue to seek funding to develop a pilot program in partnership with Ontario Trillium Foundation to build capacity in equitable approaches to evaluation for the not-for-profit sector. The pilot would involve knowledge and skill building

## Goals of the Workshops:

- Learn together: share ideas and examples of equitable approaches to evaluation.
- Build a network of people in Ontario engaged in this work from different perspectives and experiences.
- Co-create a guiding framework to inform the development of a practical toolkit.

training, mentorship or coaching to evaluators, a community of practice for ongoing engagement, and access to resources and tools.

# Overview of the Workshops

## Workshop 1: Unpacking and Valuing Equitable Evaluation Practices

October 20, 2021 (10:00 – 11:30 AM ET)

The purpose of the first workshop was to share perspectives on what it means to apply an equity lens to program evaluation. The agenda included a panel discussion featuring speakers from a non-profit agency, funding agency, and evaluator.

Questions explored in workshop 1:

- How are you using evaluation current (and for what purpose)?
- Why is it important to you?
- How can applying an equity lens to evaluation improve your work?
- What would or does applying an equity lens to evaluation look like?

## Workshop 2: Applying an Equity Lens to Evaluation: Examples and Lessons Learned

November 9, 2021 (11:00 – 1:00 PM ET)

The second workshop asked two organizations to dive deeper into what applying an equity lens to evaluation “looks like” with examples and practical tips.

Questions explored in workshop 2:

- What would or does applying an equity lens to evaluation look like?
- Who is already building capacity for engaging in and carrying out equitable approaches to evaluation and for whom (e.g., equity-deserving groups, non-profits, governments, etc.)?
- What is still needed to build capacity in the non-profit sector for engaging in and carrying out equitable approaches to evaluation in Canada?

# Summary of Panel Presentations

## Workshop 1: Perspectives on what applying an equity lens to evaluation means

### Funder perspective: Stacey MacDonald, Ontario Trillium Foundation

Stacey talked about how equitable evaluation can be viewed as both a process and outcome that ultimately helps funders re-think how evaluation is done. As a process, funders need to reconsider whose perspectives are captured, what are the questions asked, what is being valued, and who gets a say in making the results. This work involves more engagement by funders with partnered organizations, updating tools, and making sure that data collected are meaningful to the organization and participants involved.

As an outcome, funders need to rethink data collection in terms of the population served. This includes asking specific questions about whether or not certain communities are being served, considering the success rates of programs among targeted communities and barriers to accessing funding.

Overall, embedding equity in evaluation is an exercise to help funders and evaluators rethink how to engage in evaluation, catalyze conversations, and shine light on inequities.

### Evaluator perspective: Kim van der Woerd & Sofia Vitalis, Reciprocal Consulting

Kim and Sofia discussed the current state of the field of evaluation and reflected on how systemic inequities continue to persist despite years of evaluation work being done. They shed light on the reality that much of evaluation continues to contribute to the status quo and perpetuate positivist thinking rather than lead to and create meaningful change. As an example, they note 30 years of data that show that government programs are having no impact on Indigenous communities. By considering data as neutral and as something that requires no further action, we continue to perpetuate the status quo and increase inequities within Indigenous communities. They left us with questions to reflect on:

- Is evaluation having an impact on inequities?
- Why do we accept relentless incrementalism?
- Why do we stick with these traditional theories of change and logic models?

### Non-profit organization perspective: Sharif Mahdy, Students Commission of Canada

The Students Commission of Canada (SCC) works to create opportunities to ensure that young people's voices are valued and heard through. Four pillars guide their work to embed equity into evaluation practices: respect, listen, understand, and communicate.

Sharif reviewed a few of the many ways SCC embeds equity in their evaluation processes.

- **Inclusion:** Young people and community members are included as partners. They take part in developing the program plan and choosing tools that best fit the communities they serve, which include surveys, photovoice, and sharing circles.
- **Aggregating/Disaggregating Data:** The SCC aggregates data to demonstrate trends and disaggregates data to spotlight groups that have historically been marginalized or excluded from research.
- **Participatory Action Research** is the approach that they ground their evaluation processes in, with an emphasis on ensuring that their data is used to create concrete action.

### Non-profit organization perspective: Fauzia Mazhar, Coalition of Muslim Women

Fauzia shared her perspective as someone who has worked in the not-for-profit sector for over 20 years. As someone who works for an organization that is comprised of and serves an historically marginalized group in Canada – Muslim women -- Fauzia describes how the daily inequities that racialized people experience are reflected in the not-for-profit sector in different ways:





- Not-for-profit organizations that appear more “white passing” are more likely to receive funding and continue to sustain themselves. This leaves many grassroots organizations in the difficult position of having to stay true to their roots and making changes to the organization to improve sustainability.
- Evaluation continues to be mostly funder-driven, with many grassroots organizations lacking the capacity to conduct evaluations.
- In general, when evaluations are conducted, they tend to focus on the effects of program or service delivery on the individual without any consideration to systemic or environmental factors that contribute to outcomes.

These factors reflect power dynamics between service providers, evaluators and funders that perpetuate inequities, and create more barriers for smaller, grassroots not-for-profits and those serving or led by marginalized populations.

## Workshop 2: Examples of applying an equity lens to evaluation

### Reciprocal Consulting

Kim van der Woerd (Lead for Strategy and Relations) & Sofia Vitalis (Lead for Education and Mentorship)

Kim and Sofia shared their experiences following We All Count’s Data Equity Framework (<https://weallcount.com/the-data-process/>) and their key takeaways from their training with We All Count’s Founder, Heather Krause, on how to incorporate equity into every stage of a project.

- In the first stage, **Funding**, there is an acknowledgement that funding is typically not transparent. A funding statement is one strategy to increase transparency and help build rapport with clients/participants.
- In the second stage, **Motivation**, evaluators are encouraged to move away from that idea that evaluation is conducted to learn and take time to really consider what the goals and objectives are. Is this work being done for the community or because it is a requirement for funders?
- In the third stage, **Project Design**, a project can focus on equity rather than perpetuate the status quo, such as by conducting a self-determined evaluation or taking a strength-based approach.
- During the **Data Collection** stage, building relationships, being flexible, and giving up power as an evaluator are all key, which continue in the **Analysis** and **Interpretation** stages.
- Finally, in the **Communication and Distribution** stage, evaluators need to consider how to share knowledge in a way that is equitable and accessible.

### Students Commission of Canada,

Sharif Mahdy (Executive Director), Mia Fletcher (Network Coordinator), Chantelle Edwards (Network Facilitator), Florence Bergeron (Lead Analyst), Amanda Morgan (Network Coordinator)

Five members of the SCC discussed their six stages of sharing stories for research and evaluation:

- **Member engagement:** Find the right facilitators to engage with the organization. Facilitators who share lived experiences with participants can help ensure that there is an invested interest in the organization and participants involved.
- **Data collection:** Find and sometimes co-create evaluation tools. The SCC takes several precautions to ensure the anonymity of the data and consent, especially as people as young as 12 years old are asked to provide consent to a program.
- **Data entry**
- **Data analysis:** The SCC ensures that data are accessible by avoiding statistical terms and presenting data in easy-to-understand language.
- **Project report:** They do not limit themselves to traditional reports; instead, they use various forms of reporting, including data parties to communicate the findings.
- **Knowledge exchange**



## Findings from Workshop Breakout Sessions

Overall, 25 people participated in the first workshop and 30 participated in the second workshop. During the workshops, attendees participated in breakout sessions in which we discussed and explored the guiding questions of the workshops. Themes across these discussions will now be summarized.

### Workshop 1: Unpacking and Valuing Equitable Evaluation Practices

In breakout sessions in the first workshop, participants were asked to reflect on how they were currently using evaluation and the extent to which equity was being embedded into their evaluation work. In line with the workshop questions regarding equitable processes and outcomes of evaluation, participants described the ways in which they made the evaluation process more equitable through community engagement and how their work aimed to dismantle structural oppressions and champion social justice.

#### Key Points from Workshops

- Equitable approaches to evaluation must be accessible and community centred
- Relationship building with community members and partners is a key first step in the evaluation process
- Evaluation should aim to disrupt the status quo and work towards transformational change
- Evaluation trainers and funders play a key role in ensuring that equity is embedded into evaluation processes and outcomes
- Increasing capacity for evaluation within the non-profit sector will involve

### Making Evaluation Accessible and Community-Centred

Participants described the ways in which they made the evaluation process more equitable including increasing community engagement, creating more accessible language, and embracing different kinds of knowledge into the evaluation process.

Participants discussed the importance of shifting towards community-led evaluation where lived experiences are valued, and community members have power in the evaluation. Part of this process involves making the language around evaluation more accessible. As evaluators strive to increase engagement with community members, it is equally important the evaluation process, tools, and reports are created with community members in mind rather than academics or funders. For example, using arts-based evaluation approaches where people can narrate their experience through different art modalities may be a more accessible way for community members to share experiences.

Hand in hand with the shift to more accessible evaluation processes is the need to embrace different kinds of knowledge and worldviews which are more appropriate to the communities evaluators are working with. For example, Indigenous evaluation, which may incorporate a reconciliation lens or different forms of knowledge, also works towards making evaluation more accessible for community members.

Overall, the discussion highlighted that embedding equity in evaluation must involve meaningful community engagement.

### Disrupting the Status Quo

When discussing the participants' evaluation experiences as well as the importance of their evaluation work, there was a clear message that evaluators should be working towards the liberation of marginalized communities and championing social justice rather than simply meeting the requirements of funders. Embedding equity into evaluation creates space for

critical discussion and collaboration. For example, participants point to the emphasis on race-based data, which may be collected to highlight racial inequities, however if not done critically, can result in further harm and exploitation of racial groups. Further, embedding equity into evaluation allows for the amplification of voices, perspectives, lived expertise, and stories that may otherwise be missed.

### Sowing the Seeds for Future Evaluators

Finally, participants whose role involves training evaluators or funding evaluations discussed the importance of embedding conversations around equity into their processes. Evaluation trainers and funders play important roles in the evaluation process without necessarily conducting evaluation directly. Participants made it clear that these roles need to promote equity-based processes into evaluation, whether it be through providing training for evaluators to integrate equitable practices into their evaluation work, or creating grants that require projects to demonstrate equitable practices or outcomes.

Participants discussed that part of this work involves a deeper inspection of the current state of the field of evaluation. A closer examination on where funding is allocated, and an understanding of situations where resources are not assigned through a critical lens will help illuminate the extent to which funded projects are integrating equity into their work. This analysis will highlight what changes are needed to ensure equity-focused projects are resourced. Additionally, both new and experienced evaluators should be critically considering their own evaluation practices, and the extent to which they are moving beyond positivist and top-down approaches to evaluation, towards more equitable practices.

## Workshop 2: Applying an Equity Lens to Evaluation: Examples and Lessons Learned

In the second workshop, participants continued discussions of what equitable evaluation looks like and began discussions regarding who is already building capacity for engaging in equitable approaches to evaluation. In our discussions, it became clear that many organizations are already making efforts to build capacity for equitable evaluation through training programs including:

- Simon Fraser University's Evaluation for Transformation and Learning certificate
- Canadian Evaluation Society's Truth and Reconciliation course
- Banff Centre's Indigenous Evaluation Framework course
- Tamarack Institute's Foundation of Participatory Evaluation course

While acknowledging that great strides have been made in the field, the conversation shifted towards gaps that still existed in the non-profit sector. Participants felt there was a need to re-imagine what evaluation looked like within the non-profit sector and highlighted partnerships and relationship building across sectors as well as with community members as integral to this re-imagination.

### Re-Imagining Evaluation Within the Non-Profit Sector

A source of concern for participants coming from the nonprofit field is the lack of capacity of this sector to meet expectations of funders. There is a need to resource non-profits appropriately and re-design evaluation processes and expectations to better meet the needs of non-profits. For example, making sure evaluation is part of program delivery and that program providers have the capacity to carry out evaluation. Another way in which

evaluation processes can be re-imagined is during knowledge mobilization stages. Some participants discussed engaging in data parties, a practice employing a collective data analysis process (Better Evaluation, 2022), or using Photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), a qualitative research method where the information is conveyed via images and narratives, to enhance accessibility for program users. However, participants noted that re-imagining these processes requires flexibility in funder's reporting expectations.

### Partnerships and Collaboration Across Sectors

In addition to conversations regarding community engagement as a vital aspect of equitable evaluation, participants also discussed a need for partnerships within and across fields to improve capacity for equitable processes in evaluation. For example, one participant discussed collaboration with the Inclusive Design Research Centre at OCAD University. Collaboration with the Centre allowed for the integration of inclusive design principles in evaluation. To guide these partnerships, another participant mentioned incorporating principles of critical community engaged scholarship which focus on equitable collaboration across post-secondary institutions and community partners. Ultimately, community-initiated or collaboratively led partnerships across sectors and organizations can shift perceptions of evaluation as a more academically-based endeavor, reducing barriers for non-profits to engage in evaluation work.

### Relationship Building in Evaluation is as Important as the Outcome

Similar to prior conversations, participants discussed the importance of relationship building in the evaluation process. Participants stressed that relationship building and engagement is as important as the outcome of an evaluation. For example, one participant discussed how their organization designates a consistent facilitator to work with partners in evaluation throughout the entire process. Relationship building is key to improving the accessibility of the evaluation, creating transformational change, and also ensuring transparency during the evaluation process as partners can have open conversations about funder expectations. While it was stressed that building relationships should be a first step to evaluation, many recognized that this was not always feasible. Project timelines based on funder expectations can make it difficult for evaluators to appropriately allocate time towards this stage. This, again, speaks to the need to re-imagine evaluation processes and expectations to allow for more flexibility in the process.

## Conclusion & Future Directions

The workshops were productive in identifying key components of equitable evaluation practices, including transparency, community engagement, partnership building, inclusion, accessibility, disruption of traditional methods, and flexibility. The discussions were fertile ground for envisioning next steps in equitable evaluation capacity-building and the key role that funders and training will play in order to advance this area. We thank all participants for their time and contributions to these foundational discussions.

The workshops were an important starting point in the work that CCRLA hopes to conduct to advance equitable evaluation capacity-building in the non-profit sector. Through continuing partnerships with the non-profit sector, funders and evaluators, we plan to build on the findings from the workshops to generate a comprehensive guiding framework and develop a training program in equitable evaluation practices. Current work that we are undertaking towards these goals includes a scoping review of published academic and non-academic literature on equity-focused approaches to evaluation, and interviews with

practitioners in this area to further identify core components and practices in equitable evaluation. These activities will ultimately inform the development of a curriculum for a training program in equitable evaluation practices. Collaborations with key partners are integral to this process in order to advance understanding and engagement with equitable evaluation practices in non-profit and funding sectors. We look forward to continuing these exciting discussions and partnerships in the future.

## Participants

Thank you to everyone who attended one or both workshops and contributed to the discussions.

Participants include the following:

- Ashley Shaw, CNIB Foundation
- Ben Liadsky, Taylor Newberry Consulting
- Bruce Pitkin, Art Starts
- Chantelle Edwards, The Student Commission of Canada
- Ciann Wilson, Wilfrid Laurier University
- Daniela Navia, Canada Council for the Arts
- Fauzia Mazhar, Coalition of Muslim Women
- Florence Bergeron, The Student Commission of Canada
- Jessie Estwick, The Student Commission of Canada
- Julia Fursova, York University
- Lindsey Thomson, University of Guelph
- Liz Forsberg, Ontario Trillium Foundation
- Maritt Kirst, Wilfrid Laurier University
- Mark Cabaj, From Here to There Consulting
- Mia Fletcher, The Student Commission of Canada
- Nick Petten, Petten Consultation
- Nicole Burns, Bowman Performance Consultation
- Oeishi Faruquzzaman, Wilfrid Laurier University
- Robin Sokoloski, Mass Culture
- Ruth Wilson, Wilfrid Laurier University
- Sharmalene Mendis-Millard, Wilfrid Laurier University
- Shawn Newman, Toronto Arts Council
- Stacey McDonald, Ontario Trillium Foundation

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