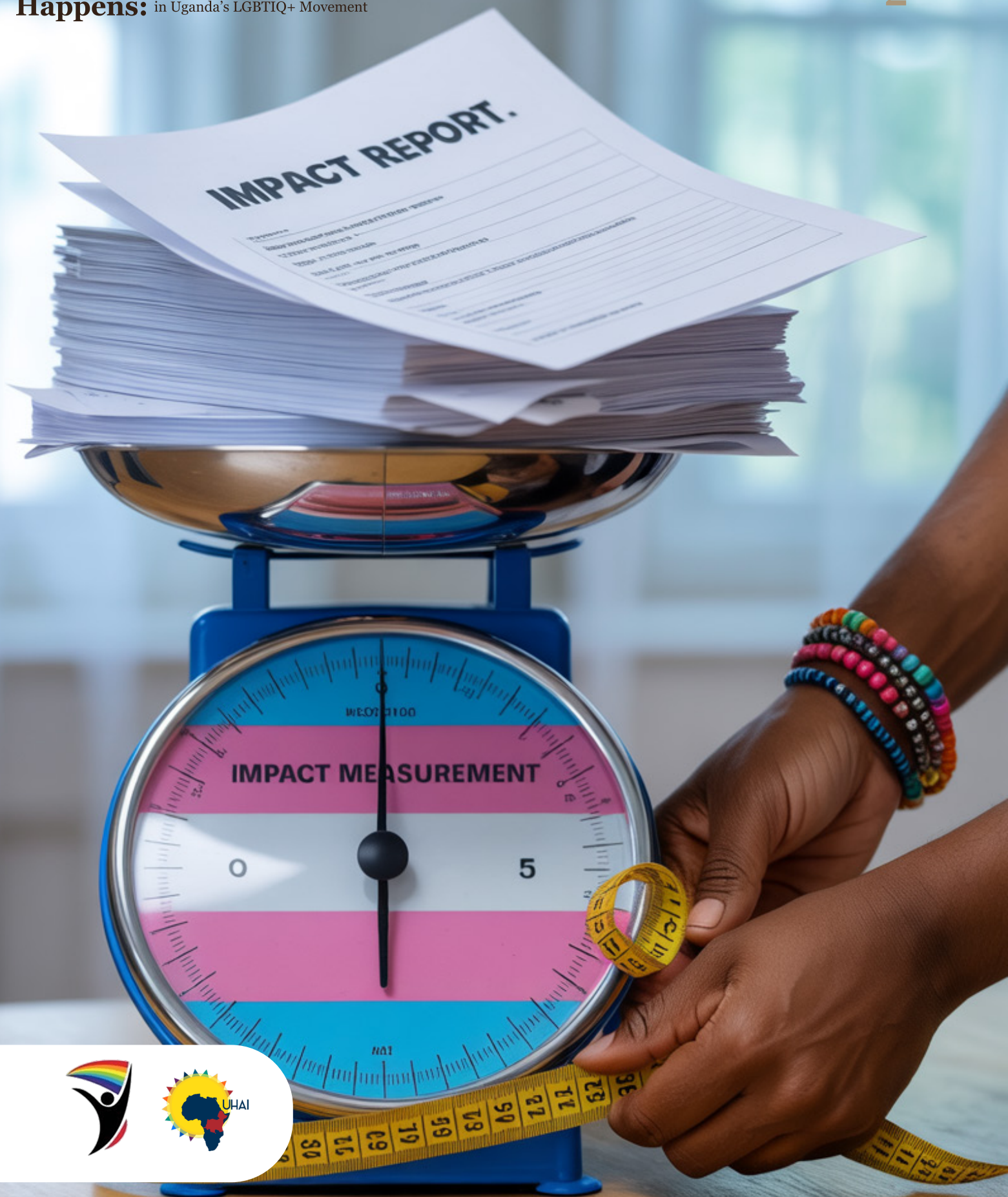


# How Change Happens:

The Case for Alternative Impact Measurement  
in Uganda's LGBTIQ+ Movement







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## Foreword

Greetings, friends and partners.

As a longtime advocate for queer justice in Uganda, I have seen firsthand how the fight for equality and human dignity is rooted in the resilience, stories, and aspirations of local communities. Yet, too often, our efforts are measured through frameworks that fail to capture the true depth and richness of our work.

This report highlights an urgent and necessary shift in how we learn, evaluate, and showcase progress within social movements, particularly those led by marginalized communities. It emphasizes the importance of moving away from rigid, generalized M&E tools imposed from above, towards approaches that are flexible, community-led, and rooted in authentic storytelling.

True change happens when communities define success on their own terms, when their voices, struggles, and victories are heard and valued. This report offers innovative insights into how we can better support, document, and celebrate these journeys, recognizing that impact is complex, nuanced, and deeply personal.

I commend the authors, project staff, and all the community members involved for their honest reflection and commitment to transforming evaluation practices. Let us take this opportunity to rethink our strategies, embrace diverse narratives, and continue building movements rooted in authenticity. Because at the end of the day, the real measure of our work is in the stories of freedom, resilience, and collective change that inspire us to keep fighting. This is truly one of the powerful ways to sustain the movement.

Have a good read.



**True change happens  
when communities  
define success on their  
own terms.**

**Frank Mugisha**  
Ugandan LGBTQ Advocate

## 1. Introduction.

This report is a compilation of conversations, and reflections within the Ugandan queer justice movement in pursuit of an alternative community-centric measure of success. In this report, we present the voices of those closest to the work, including activists, caseworkers, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practitioners who spoke candidly about the limitations of current donor-driven reporting. They also spoke of the urgent need for monitoring and evaluation methods that honor both quantitative rigor and the richness of lived experiences. Over a series of interviews, respondents described how existing templates demand endless checkboxes, “number of people reached,” “cases documented” while leaving no space for community members to share their fears, hopes, and the small yet profound moments of movement organizing that truly drive change.

These conversations revealed a movement-wide instinct to fill the gaps: from separate, unreported measurement systems that capture what donors overlook, to carefully crafted language that protects vulnerable groups in hostile contexts, to the deep desire to document the energy, relationships, and emotional journeys that standard metrics flatten or ignore. What follows are the key themes and direct insights that emerged highlighting where donor requirements fall short, where power imbalances distort what gets recorded, and where queer justice movement organizers are forging new paths toward more honest, inclusive, and movement-owned accountability.





## 2. A movement is born, and it grows.

On 3rd March 2004, a small but determined group of Ugandan activists officially launched Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG). Their goal was simple: to pool scarce local resources and build mutual support in the face of rising stigma. SMUG grew organically out of the community. Early members included Victor Mukasa, a trans man and activist, along with Sylvia Tamale, Val Kalende, Kamuhangire E. and others, with the membership comprising LGBTI organizations like Freedom and Roam Uganda (FARUG), Spectrum Initiatives Inc., Gay and Lesbian Association (GALA Uganda), Open Door (run by Father Musaala), Integrity Uganda (Bishop Ssenyonjo), among five other nascent groups. Ten founding organizations in total.

SMUG was born out of a maiden meeting hosted by the UNAIDS country coordinator who reached out to Prof. Sylvia Tamale (who was connected to the community) to convene and draft a community communique on HIV/AIDS inclusion for the community. Building on the Global Fund's terminology that recognized "men who have sex with men," the collective agreed on a new identity to move beyond the limiting "gay and lesbian" binary. They coined the name SMU-G (Sexual Minorities Uganda) to reflect a broader, more inclusive vision. Victor Mukasa led the organization from 2004-2007, paving the way for Pepe Onziema and Frank Mugisha, who became co-executive directors after his departure to an international organization based in South Africa.

From the outset, SMUG's work was sustained entirely by local financial and in-kind contributions. Dr. Paul Semugoma of IMC (now CARE) provided free medical consultations. Father Musaala offered counseling and spiritual guidance. Those with spare rooms opened their homes to peers without shelter. DJ Rachel opened up her home in Ntinda and entertainment coupons to the club, Kasha's mother hosted sleeping spaces. Sam Ganafa offered transport using a company vehicle. Pepe scrounged food from his home kitchens. Didi used their office job to print leaflets and posters on a work machine, Kaival Internet Cafe offered internet bonuses and computer training, and many others. Because the movement was locally funded, what success looked like was primarily determined by the grassroots movements involved in the work.



In 2007, Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice became SMUG's first international funder, and others soon followed. These new resources offered new possibilities and opened doors for other international funders to trickle in. However, they also introduced professionalized structures, reporting requirements, and standard monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks that, over time, subtly shifted the community practice of locally-defined evaluation and learning toward donor-driven metrics. This shift unfolded organically and quietly, shaped by a global funding system built for efficiency, scale, and standardized accountability.

Today, SMUG is immersed in a deep process of reflection, reclaiming its original spirit by re-centering decision-making in the hands of the community and redefining success on its own terms. In this journey, SMUG is in search of an alternative evaluation framework that truly matters to the communities it serves. SMUG is restoring its founding belief: genuine progress blossoms when grassroots movements shape their own story, and the M&E methods used in measuring queer justice work.



### 3. The current state of M&E in queer justice movements

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) remains a challenging but unavoidable terrain in the queer justice organizing and movements. While there is widespread recognition of the need to assess impact, dominant approaches often fall short of capturing the complex, non-linear, and deeply personal nature of social justice work. Standardized, heteronormative, and quantitative metrics such as counting “attendees at meetings” often fail to reflect outcomes like safety, dignity, and belonging, which are central to queer and human rights organizing.

Movements have long resisted these reductive tools, which are often shaped by donor priorities rather than community realities. Power imbalances between funders and grantees influence what gets measured and valued. For instance, a grantee focused on HIV/AIDS may feel pressured to report on progress toward legal decriminalization, even if that isn't their mandate, simply because it aligns with donor expectations.

These challenges aren't unique to queer justice movements. M&E professionals across sectors continue to debate the most ethical and appropriate frameworks for evaluation. Still, the tension between accountability, learning, and power remains especially stark in queer spaces. Many assessment tools prioritize outputs over outcomes, short-term gains over long-term change, and audit culture over genuine learning and reflection. They often ignore intersectional realities and are steeped in a donor reporting culture that prioritises donor needs and not communities

Critical studies show that evaluation tools are socially constructed and shaped by the perspective and biases of those who design them. As a result, local organisations often spend more time and resources meeting donor requirements than serving their communities. Conflicting stakeholder expectations further complicate matters, with one metric satisfying a donor while undermining movement goals.





Linear logic models and rigid reporting frameworks oversimplify change processes, making it harder for organizations to capture the full impact of their work. These models also amplify existing power dynamics across gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and geography, forcing local actors to constantly navigate competing interests.

Additional challenges include limited funding, time, and internal capacity; exclusion of staff from evaluation processes; and past negative experiences with external evaluators. Many organizations experience M&E as a burdensome compliance exercise, dominated by jargon-heavy, consultant-led processes that value numbers over lived experience.

The limitations of conventional measurement have also been documented by Barry Knight and Dana Doan (2020) in a call for movements to turn to Measuring What Matters to the communities they claim to serve.

**We are forced to measure what we don't even believe in.**

Alternative evaluations must be designed with clarity of purpose and understanding on whom they seek to serve, especially movements. However, in spaces where no clear or proven path exists, especially in queer justice organizing, communities must be empowered to co-create new ways of knowing, measuring, and valuing change.

In these contexts, what's needed is not just better tools but a reimagining of the very purpose and politics of M&E systems in the queer justice movement to address a M&E system in which M&E tool continue gain authority even when they misrepresent or distort impact.



## 4. Findings / feedback from community interviews

Across interviews with activists, caseworkers, and M&E practitioners, there was a clear hunger for an approach that combines hard numbers with the qualitative issues of lived experience. Existing donor tools with the movement insist on fields for “number of people reached” or “cases documented,” yet offer almost no space for the community to speak in their own voices. Squeezing the community into dropdown menus with nowhere to capture a person’s fear, their sense of relief, or how they found the strength to keep going. This imbalance, interviewees agreed, risks reducing complex human journeys to dull numbers and missing the very insights that drive meaningful change. The following are feedback highlights from these interviews:

**1. Separate evaluation that goes unreported:** Many organizations have begun to separately evaluate what they believe is important alongside what funders require, because donor-driven data tools often fail to capture the full realities of the communities they aim to serve. These separate ways of evaluating impact are not about resistance, they are about necessity.

As one movement leader put it, *“what I look at as success is that we are able to work within a difficult environment and still thrive... SMUG has helped to build many national coalitions that we never report on (to donors).”* This insight underscores a broader truth: some of the most meaningful accomplishments within the movement are rendered invisible, not because they lack impact, but because donor templates make no room for them.



Take, for example, the emphasis on documenting rights violations. Donor tools frequently prioritize standardized categories such as age disaggregation, gender identity, and sexual orientation. While these indicators are important, they often lack context, and there is rarely transparency about why such data is collected or how it will be used. Moreover, these tools are largely focused on capturing the moment of harm, but say little about *life after the violation*.

In interviews, several movement members shared that they struggled to articulate the value or purpose behind these categories, pointing to a fundamental disconnect between imposed reporting frameworks and grounded, community-led understanding. Experiences that matter deeply to affected individuals—like school expulsion or discontinuation among LGBTIQ youth—are often relegated to the “other” section of reporting forms, even though they are widespread and urgent. In another instance, when a community member survives physical violence, reporting systems may capture their age, gender, and location to prove that a violation occurred. But these systems remain silent on what happens next. As one colleague put it, *“I want to understand what’s happening in someone’s life after they experience a violation. Their state of mind, how they navigate challenges, and how they figure out life. It’s not just about how long we support them, but about understanding their journey holistically.”*

## Reports are written to satisfy external requirements, not to foster internal learning or community accountability.

These separate evaluation systems, which rarely appear in official reports, emerge from a desire to tell a fuller, more honest story. They reflect the reality that a significant portion of meaningful work—like informal psychosocial support, trust-building, or coalition development goes unrecognized simply because it doesn’t “fit the format,” so it gets evaluated separately.

**2. Reports to satisfy the donor:** In many organizations, donors are primarily seen as the audience for reporting. Narrative reporting becomes a closed loop between senior program leads and funders, with little to no visibility the communities the work is meant to serve. In this dynamic, success is narrowly defined by meeting donor targets. Reports are written to satisfy external requirements, not to foster internal learning or community accountability.



As a result, reporting becomes a box-ticking exercise focused on outputs and indicators, not learning, reflection, or responsiveness. It fails to answer deeper questions like: What worked? What didn't? What shifted? What surprised us? How did communities experience the intervention? At the heart of this is a deeper power imbalance. Organizations often stretch themselves to meet donor expectations, while donors rarely show the same urgency or flexibility in return. One respondent summarized the frustration clearly: "The money comes late, but the reports have to come in quickly." This power dynamic is also tied to broader structural inequities. As another colleague observed: "Poverty makes it hard to negotiate. When someone offers money, it's like, oh yes, what do you want me to do?" This stark reality means that many groups, especially those working closest to affected communities, enter donor relationships with limited leverage, accepting restrictive conditions out of economic necessity.

**3. The political nature of reporting:** Across the movement, it's evident that organizations tailor the language in their reports depending on the intended audience and in some cases, this involves using crafting or softened terminology to navigate hostile or politically sensitive environments. For instance, one respondent shared: "At the district and municipal levels, we usually use the term 'marginalized youth' instead of 'key populations' because that phrase is heavily targeted here. It's about protecting our work and the people we serve." This practice of adapting language is widespread, particularly in reports intended for local government or conservative stakeholders. While donor reports may include technical or explicit language aligned with international frameworks, reports at the local level are often written more cautiously to avoid triggering backlash, scrutiny, or resistance. This variation in language reflects a deeper tension within the movement: the need to stay true to community realities while also ensuring safety, access, and continued engagement in restrictive contexts. It also underscores the political nature of reporting - what is said, how it's said, and to whom often carries strategic implications. The political nature of reporting often means that communities might not recognize themselves in the reports written about them.

**The political nature of reporting often means that communities might not recognize themselves in the reports written about them.**

**4. How long does change take?** Another recurring evaluation anxiety within the movement relates to assumptions about how long meaningful change takes. Many organizations face pressure from funders to demonstrate significant outcomes within short time frames—sometimes as little as six months. As one respondent noted: “Some funders want to see major impact in a very short time, like six months. They are asking: What has changed? What improvements have been made? What’s the evidence of impact?” This expectation can be deeply misaligned with the reality of social change work, especially in complex or repressive environments like Uganda. Shifts in attitudes, systems, and behaviors often unfold gradually and unpredictably. For organizations working on issues like human rights, justice, or stigma reduction, progress is not linear, and it’s certainly not always measurable in a few months.

As one movement member explained, *“The work to be done cannot be done in months, rather years, in phases - so that in ten years’ time, the broader society accepts us. But the donors are not willing to fund you for that long; they would rather fund you to attend to an LGBTIQ person who has been homophobically attacked.”* This quote lays bare the disparity between what the work truly requires and what funders are often prepared to support. While responding to urgent needs is essential, it should not come at the expense of sustained investment in long-term transformation.

Many in the movement can see that the landscape has shifted over time, even if the tools to measure that change remain inadequate or externally defined. As one organizer reflected: “To be sincere, people who’ve left the country and traveled, they’ve seen social change because they come back and share what they’ve seen.” Another shared: “At the community level, people tell me things are different now. Back then, violence was rampant, ‘public lynchings’ and beatings were common. I wasn’t there to witness it, but I’ve heard the stories.” These testimonies reflect the complexity of progress: some of it is visible, some is felt, and some is passed on through stories. Yet, because donor priorities shift and funders often come and go, much of this change remains undocumented—or is never captured in a way that belongs to the movement itself.

The pressure to produce rapid results can distort programming priorities, discourage experimentation, and reduce opportunities for reflection and adaptation. In some cases, it leads to overstating achievements or focusing only on the most visible or quantifiable aspects of the work, while deeper, slower transformations go unacknowledged or underreported. This tension points to a need for more realistic and context-sensitive understandings of impact, one that honors the time it takes to build trust, shift norms, and support community-led change.









**5. Attribution:** Existing measurement tools revealed that donors ought to understand that for some interventions, they are rarely the sole contributors on the ground. Multiple funders often support different dimensions of the same broader vision, including infrastructure, capacity building, or community engagement. Yet there remains a persistent push for donor attribution and a desire to trace specific results directly back to a single donor's investment. This mindset can be counterproductive in systems-level work where progress is inherently collective and cumulative. It overlooks the fact that change often emerges from interconnected efforts, relationships, and learning across organizations.

A more generative approach is to embrace shared success and recognizing that when different actors contribute to the same ecosystem, progress is a joint achievement. This shift not only allows for deeper collaboration and reduced duplication, but also fosters a more honest account of what it takes to create sustainable change. At the movement and reporting level, this also means sharing information not just credit. As one member reflected, "How can I stay informed about what others in the movement are doing? How do you make that information accessible?"

In this view, one way to evaluate progress is by how well the movement stay connected and how we learn from one another, amplify each other's wins, and build on each other's work. It's about creating systems of visibility, recognition, and trust across the movement, where credit is not a zero-sum game but a shared resource. Because change isn't driven by isolated efforts it's built through collective momentum. This is not just a philosophical choice, it's also a strategic one.



**6.Different organisations, same metrics:** Interviews also revealed that donors apply a one-size-fits-all approach to monitoring and evaluation especially when comparing rural and urban organizations. Yet, the realities, contexts, and scales of work are fundamentally different, and so too should be the metrics used to assess them. As one organizer put it: “There’s a big gap between urban and rural organizing. We are not operating at the same scale and we’re not supposed to (so our targets shouldn’t be the same.”

Rural organizations often work in harder-to-reach areas with limited infrastructure, deeply embedded cultural norms, and slower change processes. Urban organizations may have more access to resources, visibility, and partnerships but face different challenges, including heightened surveillance or political scrutiny. Beyond geography, organizations also differ in their capacities, strategies, and relationships with the communities they serve. What success looks like in one context may not apply in another. Some may measure success in terms of policy influence or media visibility; others may define it as building trust, keeping people safe, or sustaining a presence in hostile environments. Generic metrics risk flattening these differences and failing to capture the depth or relevance of an organization’s impact, or its unique strategy.

**7.Measuring the quality of relationships:** For many organizations, success isn’t just about outputs or outcomes, it’s also about the quality of connections and relationships they build within the movement.

A movement is not a single organization, but a web of actors with shared values, working from different locations and strategies. Without this, efforts can become siloed or even duplicative, weakening the collective impact. However, sometimes movements are held together by relationships.

Especially in contexts where movements face shrinking civic space, repression, or fragmentation, relationships become a tool that allows the work to continue. Mapping and measuring relationships can help organizations understand where strength lies, where gaps exist, and who holds connective power across networks. Movements that prioritize healthy relationships are more sustainable, particularly when activism involves trauma, precarity, or intergenerational struggles.

The interviews also revealed that government actors matter too as a way to evaluate the work. One respondent shared: “We would actually like to measure the strength of our working relationships with local authorities. But most donors don’t take that seriously. They would rather you report on your work with the community and leave it at that.”









There is often little emphasis from donors on whether or how organizations engage with local government beyond simply stating that such engagement exists. Rarely do donors take time to understand or explore the depth, challenges, or value of these relationships, even though they can be essential for long-term change, legitimacy, and sustainability. In many cases, cultivating trust with government actors is slow, politically sensitive work. It's not always flashy or easy to quantify, but it can have significant strategic impact whether it's opening space for dialogue, reducing risk, or enabling more coordinated service delivery.

Yet donors often shy away from supporting or measuring these kinds of relational efforts. Funders themselves are under pressure to demonstrate results to their own donors that align with high-level, easily quantifiable goals like policy change. As a result, they tend to favor investments in policy advocacy or other interventions with clearer metrics, rather than community-level engagement or trust-building with local authorities, which are more complex and harder to measure. Engaging powerful stakeholders is inherently challenging, and many funders stick to what feels familiar or "provable," even if it overlooks critical groundwork happening at the grassroots.

**8. Capturing the Energy of the Moment:** Many in the movement feel that current data and reporting tools miss something essential: the energy of the moment, the passion, urgency, and momentum that often drive change but can't be reduced to numbers or tick-boxes. As one respondent put it: "Some tools limit information, you can't include everything you'd love to share. Some energy isn't captured there, and that's the difference." Filling out donor-driven tools can feel mechanical and draining. "Sometimes you fill in a tool and get exhausted," someone noted. "Question one, two, three, they all feel the same." These repetitive formats flatten the texture of real work, making it hard to reflect the dynamism, risk, and learning that unfold in real time.

For members of the movement, true progress isn't counted in workshop attendance or policy briefs alone; it's measured in the simple acts of daily life. Increased confidence and self-esteem outside of organized spaces are an indicator that the work has taken root where it matters most—in a person's own sense of dignity and belonging.



When a survivor of family rejection walks into a hospital and asserts their right to respectful treatment, they are not merely accessing services; they are embodying the movement's success and its energy. That moment (if treated as an indicator) reflects months of legal support, peer counseling, and advocacy converging to rebuild their belief in their own worth.

As one organizer shared, *“Documenting lived experiences, someone sharing their transness authentically is a key indicator of success. When more people felt free to express and share their stories, it showed increased visibility. The number of stories we could share gave us grounding, but it wasn't just about quantity; it was about the impact of those narratives.”* These stories offer not just evidence of visibility but markers of deep, internal transformation.

In fact, some of the most powerful outcomes go unnoticed by traditional M&E systems. *“We have seen people being accepted back in spaces where they had been discriminated against or excluded, and internal policies changed, but this is something that is usually not measured.”* These forms of change, quiet, relational, and embedded in institutional culture are hard to quantify but are critical markers of impact.

By capturing these shifts in how someone carries themselves in a marketplace, speaks up at a community meeting, or insists on fair treatment at a clinic the movement recognizes that healing and empowerment extend far beyond its walls. Documenting (or even reflecting on) these personal victories affirms that its interventions foster not only safety but also the self-assurance needed to navigate everyday life with pride and agency. This is mainly felt in the energy of the moment.

**True progress isn't counted in workshop attendance or policy briefs alone; it's measured in the simple acts of daily life.**

## 5. Conclusion and what next

In building the conclusive segment of this report, we start with a thought experiment; what would measuring success, and evaluating look like if we were only reporting to ourselves and not external donors. The recommendations offered below have also been designed from meeting insights and reflections from the interviews conducted during this process. During this process, 'deep listening' was important to ensure that what was measured was in accord with "what" the community wants and needs.

This segment of the report also articulates, "what" we seek to measure, but does not extend "how" we seek to measure it. We also acknowledge that both the "what" and "how" might change over-time so the queer justice movement should regularly revisit these questions on - "what" we seek to measure, and "how" we seek to measure it.

These recommendations are designed to measure ecosystem and movement success, and not the success of one organisation. The unique organisations within the movement are also encouraged to undertake an organisation specific reflection process on how they define success (beyond what funders ask) at the deep organisational level.






## Recommendation of an alternative ecosystem and movement evaluation method.

**Working towards a community owned tool:** Community shared that effective M&E tools are those designed not for communities, but with them. When activists and organizers sit side-by-side with the people they serve, shaping questions, defining terms, choosing language, the result is a system that feels familiar, safe, and genuinely useful. In practice, this means drafting forms in local dialects and idioms, so respondents don't wrestle with foreign jargon. By anchoring M&E in the lived realities of those most affected, these community-owned tools become more than mere paperwork; they become vehicles for dignity, inclusion, and authentic accountability. The following are the measurement questions and "what" the movement presented as a definition of ecosystem success. These have been community designed to create shared reflection rather than one-sided accountability;

- i. What is the quality of relationships amongst members of the movement?
- ii. What is the quality of relationships between members of the movement and any government actors they work with?
- iii. What is the energy within the movement right now? (This is different from the quality of relationships because it speaks to what is happening in the movement. For example, energy might be influenced by an existing proposed law, and not relationships amongst movement members)
- iv. What is the level of safety you feel at movement meetings?
- v. What is the level of confidence outside movement spaces?





A large group of people, mostly women, are dancing in a circle on a dirt path. They are wearing vibrant, traditional Ugandan clothing, including colorful dresses and headwraps. The scene is captured from an elevated perspective, showing the circular formation and the surrounding landscape. The dancers are holding hands or have their arms raised, creating a sense of unity and movement. The background shows more people and the continuation of the path, suggesting a large gathering or festival.

**Building collective power:** Building collective negotiating power is essential for movements because it creates the leverage needed to challenge, interrupt, and ultimately reshape how external donors define and measure success. In a funding landscape often dominated by external agendas and rigid logframes, movements that speak in unison become harder to dismiss or divide. Without unity, individual organizations, especially those closest to the grassroots, risk being sidelined, tokenized, or pressured into compliance with donor-imposed priorities that may have little to do with the community's actual needs. But when communities organize together around shared values and lived realities, they assert a counterweight to donor power, grounding negotiations in their own definitions of progress, healing, justice, and liberation. Importantly, this power is not static, neither does it happen accidentally, it's cultivated through consistent relationship-building, solidarity across differences, collective strategizing, and political alignment. It's through this ongoing work of connection and co-creation that movements build the credibility and strength to negotiate for alternative monitoring and evaluation. In doing so, they not only protect their autonomy but also compel donors to move beyond transactional funding and engage with community-driven visions on equitable terms.



## Acknowledgments

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the community members, activists, and organizations both in the country and those in the diaspora, who generously shared their experiences, insights, and stories for this report. Your courage, resilience, and dedication to social justice and LGBTIQ+ rights in Uganda have been the true driving force behind this work.

Special thanks to the funders and partners who support our movement-building work and who recognize the importance of evolving evaluation and learning practices to better reflect community realities. Your openness to rethinking traditional frameworks has made this report possible.

Our deepest appreciation also goes to the courage of researchers, Soita Khatondi Wepukhulu and the team of writers, and supporters who contributed their time, expertise, and passion to bring this vision to life.

Finally, we thank everyone working tirelessly to build more inclusive, transparent, and community-centered movements. Your efforts are shaping a future where success is defined by the realities of those most affected.

Together, we continue to learn, grow, and push toward a more just and equitable world.





