

IMPACT SPHERE GLOBAL



PRIORITY TO PROGRESS

Approach and Evidence Guide

Impact Sphere Global (ISG) helps purpose-driven organizations understand what may be interrupting progress and choose a practical way forward.

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impactsphere.global

01 | AT A GLANCE

When an important goal isn't advancing as it should

You may be leading a new strategy, a public commitment, a partnership, a reform, or an institution-wide initiative. People agree that it matters. They are working hard. Yet decisions aren't producing dependable follow-through, responsibility is scattered, or the same obstacles keep returning.

Priority to Progress is Impact Sphere Global's approach to helping purpose-driven organizations understand and strengthen the human and operating conditions that turn shared goals into coordinated, sustainable action.

**IMPORTANT SHARED GOAL → FOCUSED INQUIRY → CLEARER PICTURE
→ PRACTICAL WAY FORWARD**

Priority to Progress helps leaders:

- 1. Focus the inquiry.** Identify the shared goal that needs to advance, who and what it depends on, and the decision the inquiry should inform
- 2. Find the point of friction.** Look for observable signs of where agreement, effort, or participation is failing to produce progress
- 3. Bring the right evidence into view.** Match the perspectives and evidence to the importance, complexity, and risk of the situation
- 4. Decide what to strengthen next.** Choose an action suited to the organization's authority, resources, relationships, and constraints

Leaders can begin with a brief individual reflection or use ISG to examine a consequential goal across multiple perspectives and sources. The point is not to diagnose the whole organization. It is to understand enough to act more intelligently.

02 | THE CHALLENGE

Why shared goals lose momentum

The strategy may be sound. The mission may be widely shared. The people involved may be capable and committed. Yet progress can still weaken between agreement and execution.

Purpose-driven leaders are often responsible for outcomes they cannot deliver through direct authority alone. A university may need employers, students, faculty, public agencies, funders, and communities to act together. A ministry may depend on local administrations, service providers, civil society, and political actors. An NGO or social enterprise may rely on donors, partners, communities, governments, and peer organizations. In every case, the institution and its wider ecosystem shape what becomes possible.

Priority to Progress examines five places where shared effort commonly loses force:

Activity without coordinated action	Meetings, partnerships, and initiatives continue, but decisions, ownership, resources, and follow-through remain unclear.
Shared purpose without credible trust	People support the mission but question the process, the institution's consistency, or whether commitments will be honored.
Participation without meaningful influence	Stakeholders contribute, but their involvement does not clearly shape decisions, resources, implementation, or learning.
Contribution that cannot be sustained	The work becomes burdensome, transactional, or dependent on extraordinary effort from a few people.
Evidence without collective learning	Information is collected and reported, but it does not change decisions or practice.

These patterns are starting points for inquiry, not proof that an organization is failing.

03 | HOW ISG HELPS

Start with the goal leaders are accountable for

Leaders rarely describe their problem as an operating-system failure. They are trying to deliver a strategy, honor a public commitment, make a partnership work, implement a reform, or improve outcomes that depend on many people acting together.

- 1. Name the real-world commitment.** Clarify what the organization is trying to accomplish, why it matters now, and which decision or result requires attention
- 2. Identify where progress is breaking down.** Use observable signals to narrow a broad frustration into a more useful question
- 3. Include the perspectives the decision requires.** Bring in the people who authorize, implement, experience, support, or question the work
- 4. Examine the conditions shaping progress.** Consider coordination, trust, influence, contribution, learning, and the institutional arrangements surrounding them
- 5. Choose a proportionate response.** Determine what can be addressed now, what requires deeper inquiry, and what sits outside ISG's scope

A leader does not need to understand ISG's full framework before beginning. The first task is to make sense of what is happening around one consequential shared goal.

04 | THE FIVE CONDITIONS

What supports progress in practice

The five conditions help leaders examine the space between shared intention and coordinated action. They are connected lenses for inquiry, not five independent scores.

1. Coordinated action

Discussion and decisions become clear commitments, ownership, resources, and follow-through. Activity connects to an actual decision and to the people responsible for advancing it.

LEADERSHIP QUESTION *Are people merely active, or is their activity producing coordinated action?*

2. Credible trust

People have reason to rely on the process and on one another's commitments. They can raise concerns, work through disagreement, and see how decisions are made.

LEADERSHIP QUESTION *What gives people reason to trust, or distrust, how this work is being pursued?*

3. Meaningful influence

The people affected by or essential to the work can shape relevant priorities, decisions, implementation, resources, and learning before everything important has been settled.

LEADERSHIP QUESTION *What can participants genuinely influence?*

04 | THE FIVE CONDITIONS

What supports progress in practice (continued)

4. Sustainable contribution

People have useful, supported, and achievable ways to contribute. Their roles create reciprocal value and do not depend indefinitely on personal sacrifice or one heroic champion.

LEADERSHIP QUESTION *Can people sustain what this work is asking of them?*

5. Collective learning

People define what they need to learn, use relevant evidence, interpret it together, and change decisions or practice when the evidence warrants it.

LEADERSHIP QUESTION *What has the organization changed because of what it has learned?*

Two tests across all five

Institutional embedding	Is the practice supported by authority, budgets, staffing, roles, routines, incentives, information flows, and accountability?
Sustainability	Can the practice continue and adapt through changes in leadership, staffing, funding, political conditions, organizational priorities, or external shocks?

ISG also considers power, resources, structural constraints, possible harm, and the limits of the available evidence.

05 | THE WIDER ARCHITECTURE

How Priority to Progress relates to ISG's framework

Priority to Progress is the practical pathway through ISG's broader body of work. Leaders do not need to master this terminology to use the approach.

Impact Systems™	ISG's emerging field of inquiry and practice for understanding how institutional design, ecosystem relationships, operating practice, power, resources, and learning interact.
Institutional Impact Architecture™	The authority, governance, roles, resources, incentives, routines, information flows, and accountability arrangements inside an institution.
Social Impact Operating System™ (SIOS™)	The recurring relational and operating practices through which an institution and its ecosystem coordinate action, build credible trust, expand influence and ownership, sustain meaningful contribution, and learn together.
Social Impact Ecosystem	The people, organizations, institutions, communities, relationships, rules, resources, and information flows surrounding a shared social goal.
Changemaking Network Effects	ISG's working concept for how aligned action, learning, trust, leadership, and useful contribution may spread through an ecosystem and increase the capacity of others to act.
Priority to Progress helps leaders apply this architecture to the goal, decision, or commitment in front of them.	

06 | WAYS TO BEGIN

Match the depth of inquiry to what is at stake

Some leaders need a private moment of reflection. Others need a credible organizational picture before making a consequential decision. Priority to Progress offers several ways to begin, and no one needs to complete them all in sequence.

Resource or Service	What it Provides
Check + Companion	Check: A brief personal reflection that helps one leader recognize an initial signal. Companion: A self-guided resource for exploring that signal, considering another perspective, and choosing a useful next step.
Snapshot	A focused inquiry using limited organizational evidence to clarify one gap around a defined shared goal.
Operating Review	A wider examination of a shared goal across several perspectives and sources.
Strategic Briefing	A deeper examination of the institutional and ecosystem conditions surrounding a consequential goal or commitment.
BRING ONE CONSEQUENTIAL GOAL. LEAVE WITH A CLEARER WAY FORWARD.	

Start with the free Priority to Progress Check + Companion

Explore ways to work with ISG at impactsphere.global/work-with-us

Questions can be directed to impact@impactsphere.global.

07 | FOUNDATIONS

What has informed the approach

Priority to Progress brings together established fields, ISG research, leadership experience, qualitative interviews, and continuing learning from practice.

Established fields and adjacent approaches

The approach has been informed by systems thinking and systems change, collective impact and cross-sector collaboration, stakeholder and community engagement, organizational learning, network and ecosystem leadership, institutional design and implementation, and organizational sustainability and resilience.

ISG does not claim to have invented collaboration, systems thinking, engagement, or networks. Its contribution is to examine institutional arrangements and ecosystem relationships together, particularly the connection between ecosystem ambition and institutional operation.

Research on purpose-driven organizations

ISG has synthesized research on participation and influence, trust and relational infrastructure, collective learning, institutional capacity and sustainability, cross-sector collaboration, and the implementation pressures facing governments, NGOs, higher education institutions, and other purpose-driven organizations.

Research with and about purpose-driven leaders

ISG reviewed 300+ recent public sources connected to 65 visible leaders across government, NGOs, higher education, and cross-sector partners. This research examined the goals leaders were advancing, the pressures they faced, and the institutional and ecosystem demands surrounding their work.

ISG has also conducted 15 qualitative interviews with purpose-driven leaders across sectors and geographies. Five recorded deep-dive interviews provide the principal documented qualitative evidence. Ten shorter interviews generally echoed the central patterns and helped test whether those patterns resonated beyond the five deep dives. The full interview group represented leaders from different sectors and geographies.

08 | WHAT THE EVIDENCE MEANS

A credible guide, not a universal diagnosis

The evidence gives ISG a strong basis for asking disciplined questions. It does not justify reducing a complex institution to one score or claiming that the same explanation applies everywhere.

What leaders can reasonably expect

- A coherent way to examine why a shared goal may not be advancing as intended
- Attention to both institutional arrangements and relationships across the wider ecosystem
- Five recurring operating conditions that help organize evidence and perspectives
- A focus on what people actually do, not only what policies, plans, committees, or partnership agreements say
- A clearer distinction between what can be acted on now and what requires deeper inquiry or different expertise

What the framework cannot establish on its own

- The single cause of every stalled or difficult initiative
- How well an entire organization is operating from one person's responses
- That one sequence or solution will work in every sector or context
- That stronger operating conditions will automatically produce a specific social outcome
- That relationship or coordination work can overcome missing authority, resources, legal constraints, political opposition, security risks, or technical limitations

Priority to Progress supports better inquiry and more grounded action. It is not a certification, audit, formal impact evaluation, or guarantee of results.

09 | RESPONSIBLE USE

Use the approach to improve judgment, not replace it

Most leaders need to know a few practical boundaries. The more detailed safeguards and evidence procedures guide ISG's own work behind the scenes.

Use Priority to Progress to:

- Clarify a concern that has remained broad or difficult to name
- Identify perspectives and evidence that are missing
- Understand differences in how people experience the same work
- Decide whether a modest adjustment or deeper inquiry is warranted
- Choose a next step that fits the authority and resources available

Do not use it to:

- Score an organization from one person's responses
- Evaluate an individual's performance
- Force people to disclose sensitive information or participate
- Average away meaningful disagreement
- Replace formal evaluation, legal advice, safeguarding, mediation, financial analysis, clinical guidance, security expertise, or other specialist support

When several people participate, their involvement should be voluntary and appropriately confidential. Differences in authority, risk, and access to information should remain visible. A concerning signal is a reason to ask a better question, not an automatic conclusion or recommendation to hire ISG.

10 | CONTINUING DEVELOPMENT

An approach that will keep learning

ISG continues to test and refine Priority to Progress as it learns from new research, new contexts, and the experience of leaders and organizations using the approach.

This means that ISG will:

- Continue examining the approach across sectors, regions, and organizational settings
- Seek perspectives beyond senior leadership, including those responsible for implementation and those affected by the work
- Learn from initiatives that stall, produce unintended consequences, or operate under severe structural constraints
- Refine its questions, operating practices, and evidence requirements when stronger evidence warrants change
- Date and version this guide so readers can see when the public approach has been updated

Client and audience response can show which problems resonate and which questions are useful. ISG will not treat interest, downloads, or positive feedback as proof that the framework has been validated.

The commitment is simple: use the strongest available evidence, remain candid about its limits, and improve the approach as ISG learns.

Ready to examine a consequential shared goal?

Start with the free Priority to Progress Check + Companion, or explore ways to work with ISG at impactsphere.global/work-with-us.