Clear Horizon

What! No survey? Introducing the Collective Noticing Method (CNM)

Long paper | AES 2026

Jess Dart

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Larrakia people as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the lands and waters on which we meet today, here on the Darwin waterfront.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present, and recognise their enduring connection to these lands, waters and communities.



How the session runs

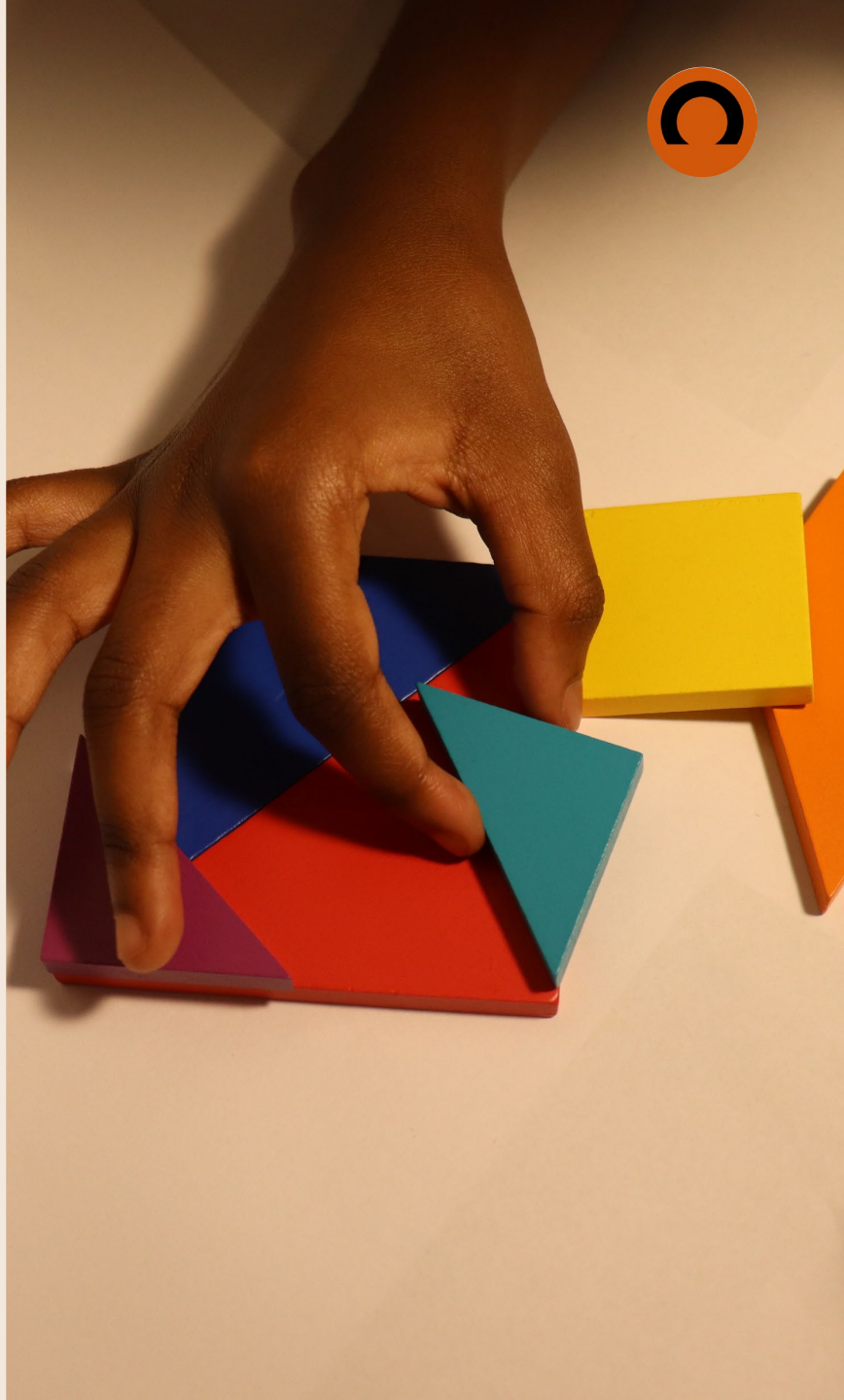
Introduction to Collective Noticing Method

Nuts and bolts: the dimensions, five steps, logging and sensemaking

In practice: the case study and outputs

Interactive segment: mapping advantages, limitations and boundary conditions

Q&A and close

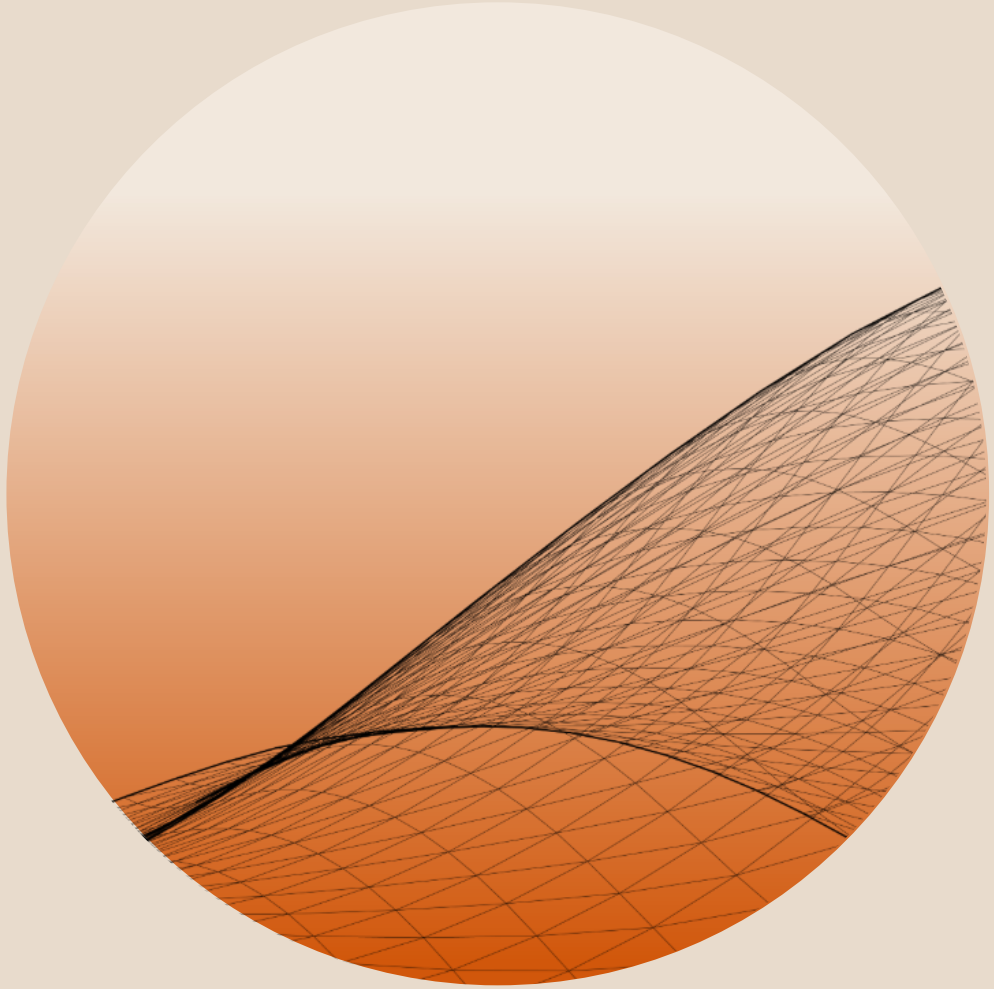


Why this method, why now?

Ambition to transform entrenched systems and tackle the polycrisis is growing

As ambition grows, so does complexity

Rise of place-based and systems change approaches across govt, NFP and Philanthropy



The evaluation challenge

Change happens in an unpredictable & non-linear manner.

Progress can hit dead ends, systems can spring back to the status quo, or there can be pushback.

When positive shifts do happen, they tend to be non-linear, with pockets of change in specific parts of the system.

And pressure to demonstrate impact in short time frames – when it can take years to get going.



The 3 phases of *systems change*

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	+++	*Evaluation Focus*



The results phase
The ocular and tangible results of a changed system

Indicator heaven
(and dealing with attribution)



The messy middle
In which we interact and respond to the system

Spotting and responding to shifts in the system



The foundation phase
The messy start and pivots in design, governance, resourcing, and how we all show up including funders and evaluators!

Developmental evaluation
(helping to set it up and adapt)



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Evaluation Focus

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Collective Noticing:
Spotting and responding to shifts in the system

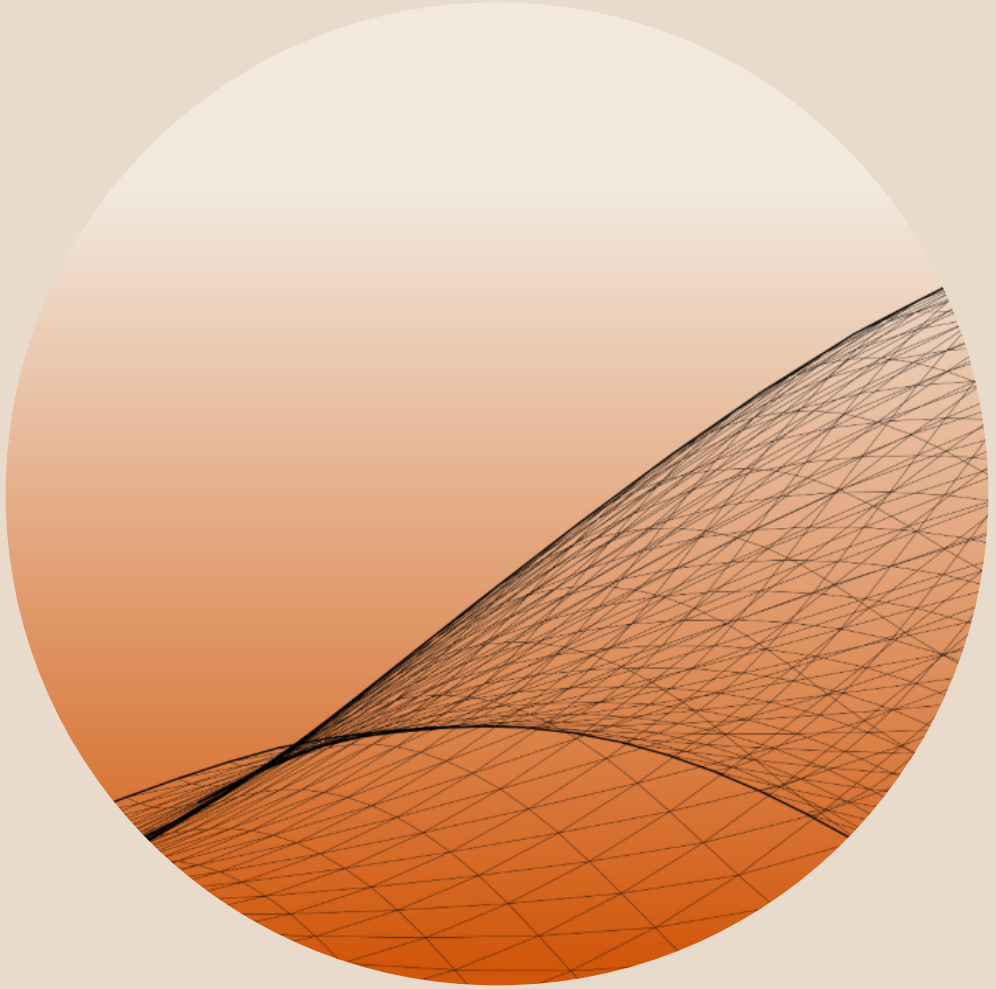
The foundation phase
The messy start and pivots in design, governance, resourcing, and how we all show up including funders and evaluators!

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(helping to set it up and adapt)



Foundations and lineage

Collective noticing has a long history. Collective Noticing METHOD builds on that practice.



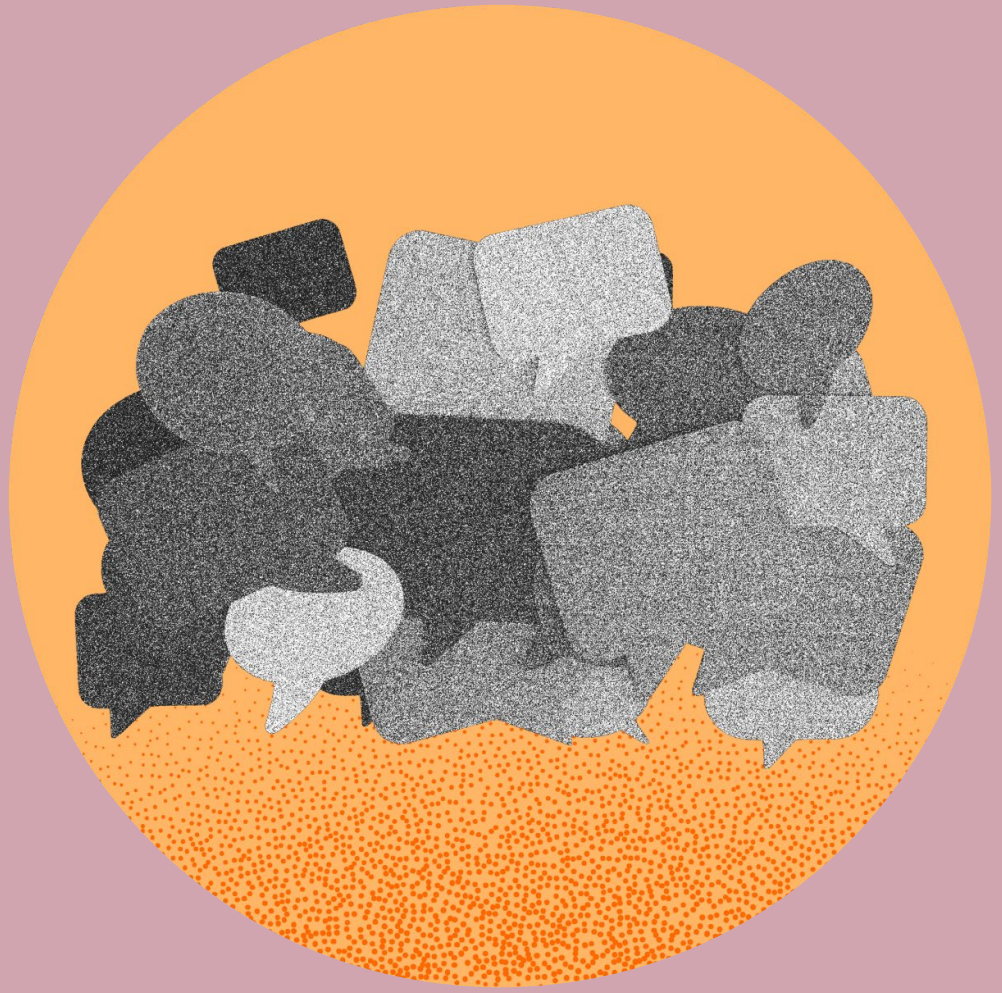
Collective noticing as a practice

Harnesses the eyes and ears of those close to the action to track what is changing —

Think crime stoppers

Water watch…

Citizen science (Bonney et al., 2009)



Collective noticing in evaluation has a history

- Most Significant Change (MSC) (Davies & Dart, 2005)
- Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012)
- Ripple Effects Mapping (Chazdon et al., 2017)
- Context monitoring, and more

From this we developed the Collective Noticing Method (CNM). It's a bit like MSC+++



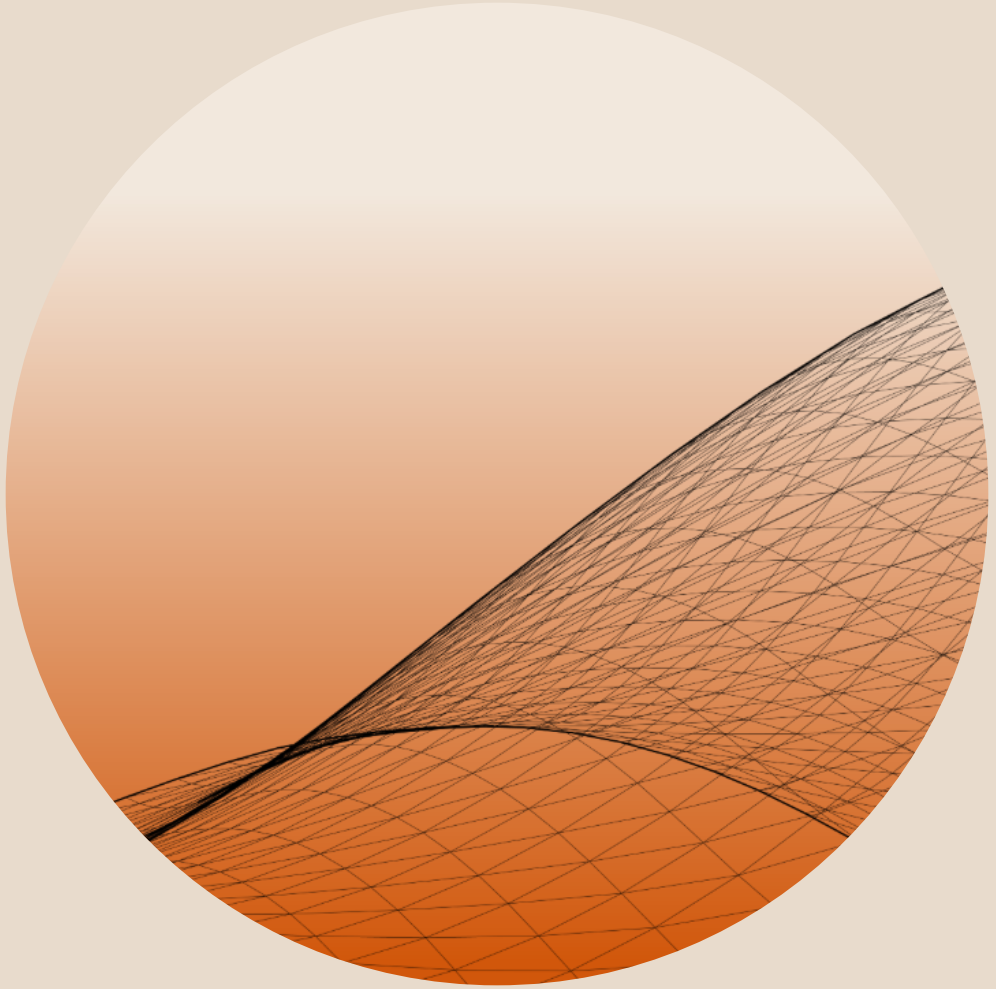
What Collective Noticing adds to MSC

- A natural evolution of MSC
- New dimensions, wider frame of evidence than MSC
- Short, multi-perspective logs



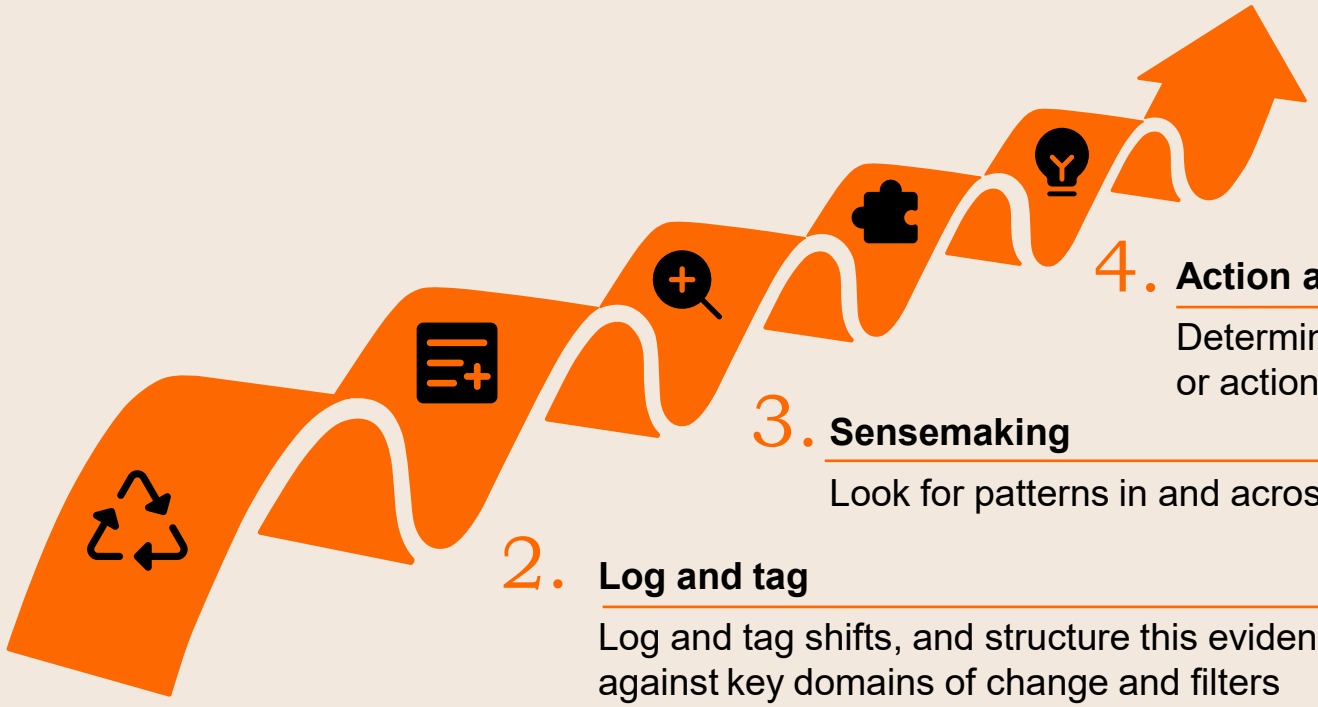
The method

Five dimensions and five steps.



Collective Noticing Method

A participatory method for tracking and learning from emergent changes



5. **Harvest**

Synthesise case studies for the most important changes that are emerging

4. **Action and inquiry**

Determine any adaptations, inquiry, or actions to take

3. **Sensemaking**

Look for patterns in and across the logs

2. **Log and tag**

Log and tag shifts, and structure this evidence against key domains of change and filters

1. **Collectively see, hear, and sense**

Notice the subtle changes happening (e.g. in the system)

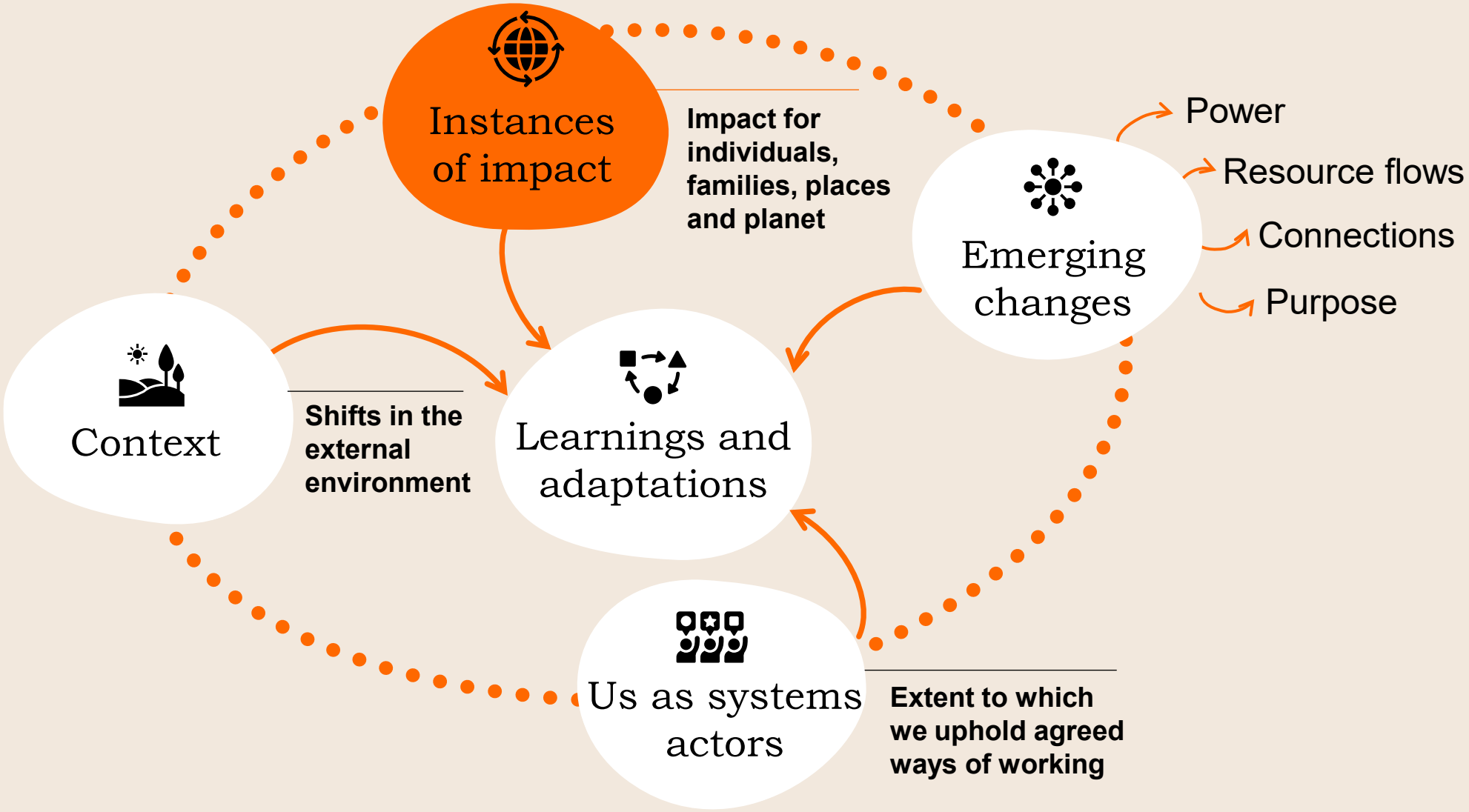
Who logs?

Those closest to the action:

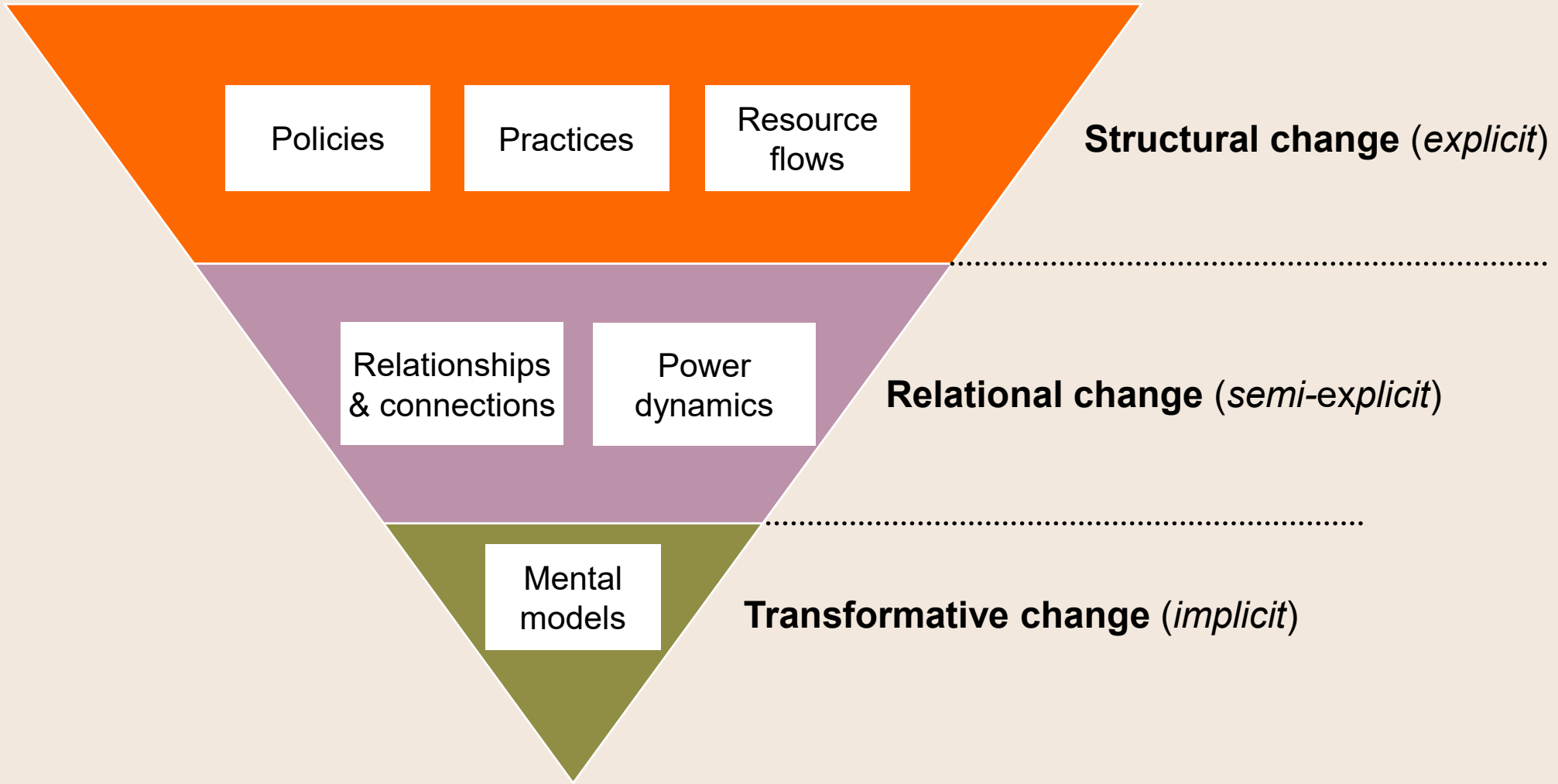
- Reflects the nature and ethos of the work
- Programmatic: implementers and partners
- Networks/ collaborations: all members
- Systems change: ideally include people with lived experience of the system



Dimensions of the *Collective Noticing Method*



The Waters of Systems Change



Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The Waters of Systems Change. FSG.

Digitally enabled Collective Noticing

Track to Change | Impact measurement and learning platform for complex change

Our Path

Reflection reports

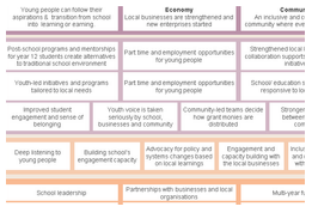
MEL plan

Initiative scope

Our Path is a place-based approach working in 2 communities....

View MEL plan

Theory of Change



Our Path TOC v2
2 Dec 2025

Framework

Measurement framework

Principles

Data collection

21 Activity logs

NAME	LAST UPDATED
Local employer roundtable	15 Jul
training	14 Jul
School mental health awareness session	20 May
Youth arts and music festival	20 May
Business mentorship program kickoff	20 May

View All

7 Principle logs

NAME	LAST UPDATED
Transparency in scholarship process	25 May
Business mentors acted with strong commitment	21 May
Council shared resources openly with youth group	29 Sep
Agriculture training missed gender balance	29 Sep
Festival planning highlighted youth leadership	29 Sep

View All

12 Impact logs

NAME	LAST UPDATED
Rural transport pilot improves school attendance	31 Jul
First youth-led festival builds pride	25 May
Grant Supports New Enterprise	28 Jan
Sustainable agriculture training for youth contributes to uptake of sustainable practices	14 Jan
Business mentorship network helps young people find dream career path	27 Nov

View All

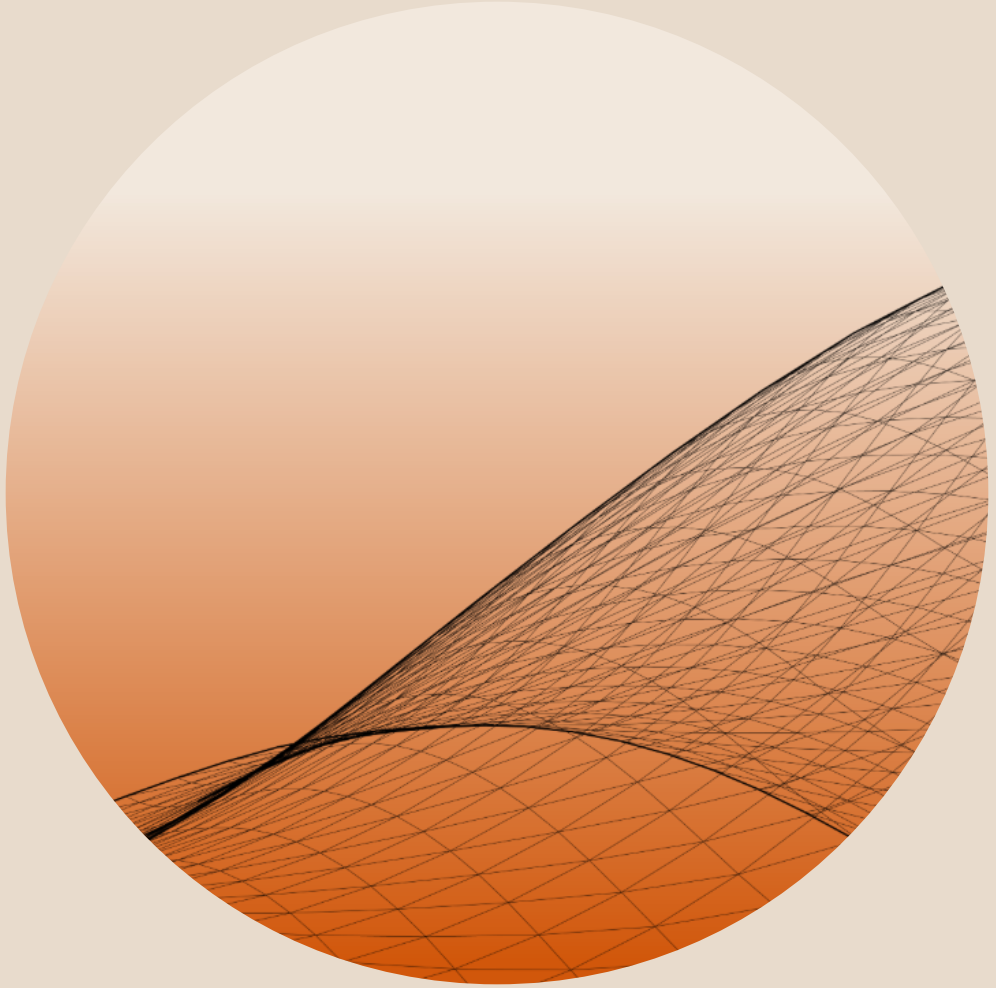
8 Learning logs

NAME	LAST UPDATED
Hub programming favoured older youth	25 May
YAC needs broader representation	25 May
Curriculum workshop needed more student input	21 May
Festival showed value of youth leadership	29 Sep
Scholarship applications highlighted digital divide	29 Sep

View All

What it looks like in practice

Examples, a case, and the outputs it generates.



The rhythm in practice

- Partners, staff and collaborators log continuously
- Meet every three months to draw out patterns and decide on any adaptations
- An online system holds the logs
- Key enabler is to use the data, or people stop logging



Case example: VicHealth Learning Partnership

In 2023 VicHealth launched a 10-year strategy to transform three societal systems that underpin health outcomes in Victoria. The challenge was how to measure progress.

Clear Horizon partnered with the Research and Impact team to design and implement an impact and evaluation framework, framed across three spheres: control, influence and aspiration.



CNM is a key part of the practices and routines implementing that framework, logging shifts against five systems conditions: policies and practices, resource flows, connections, power dynamics and mental models.

Another dimension tracks adherence to the VicHealth ways of working, for example, listen and learn from First Nations People.

The team analyses log data in quarterly strategic learning sessions, then captures the bigger impact story in an annual impact and learning report.

Example log entries of system shifts

Example 1:

A youth-led collaboration notices that young people are increasingly being invited to speak at events and policy forums.

Example 2:

An NGO partner notices that people with a disability, who were previously stigmatised and marginalised, are now being invited into village-level planning and budgeting processes for the first time, and that proposals coming from People with a Disability or groups experiencing disadvantage are being funded and implemented.

Example 3:

A local council changes its sponsorship guidelines to exclude harmful industries. This could be logged as a shift in policy and practice, with implications for public health and community wellbeing.

Question: Do these shifts represent a change in: Change in relationships? Power dynamics? Change in policy, practice, resource flows or mindsets?

So what?



The logs, when aggregated and analysed, provide an emerging picture of early shifts in systems and enabling conditions, and how initiatives are contributing to that change.

***And insights about what to do next*.**

Note – there can be examples of systems flip-back, where power is reclaimed by influential actors or commercial interests in a way that is counter to equity. We need to track and respond to both negative and positive shifts.

Outputs of the *Collective Noticing Method* in Systems MEL

CNM outputs include:

Learning Briefs

Is a synthesis of what has emerged from the learning logs, describing realisations, explanations for the need to pivot direction (1-2 pages and may include visuals).

Dashboards

Dashboards, such as those generated using Power BI, can illustrate patterns across logs to visualise emergent changes and themes.

Significant Instances of Systems and Policy Improvement (SIPSI) Case Studies

From the impact logs, when there is sufficient evidence to suggest system shifts or potential positive implications for people, place or planet, we produce a case study that traces the contribution of the work to the outcomes.

Complementary Outputs include:

Short-cycle reflection reports

Light touch summaries (e.g. monthly or quarterly) including insights, promising changes, testing of assumptions, or that document pivots based on logs and/or sensemaking, to support agile decisions.

Long-cycle reflection reports

Produced every 6-12 months, stacking impact logs to deeper dive into patterns of evidenced change and link with some level of contribution analysis.

Other outputs

Data can also inform other outputs, such as patch or pilot evaluations—where you zoom in on a single activity with a mini-evaluation—or synthesis studies that pull together multiple sources to reveal bigger trends and progress at a systems-wide scale.

Discuss the limitations and benefits – what else?

Benefits

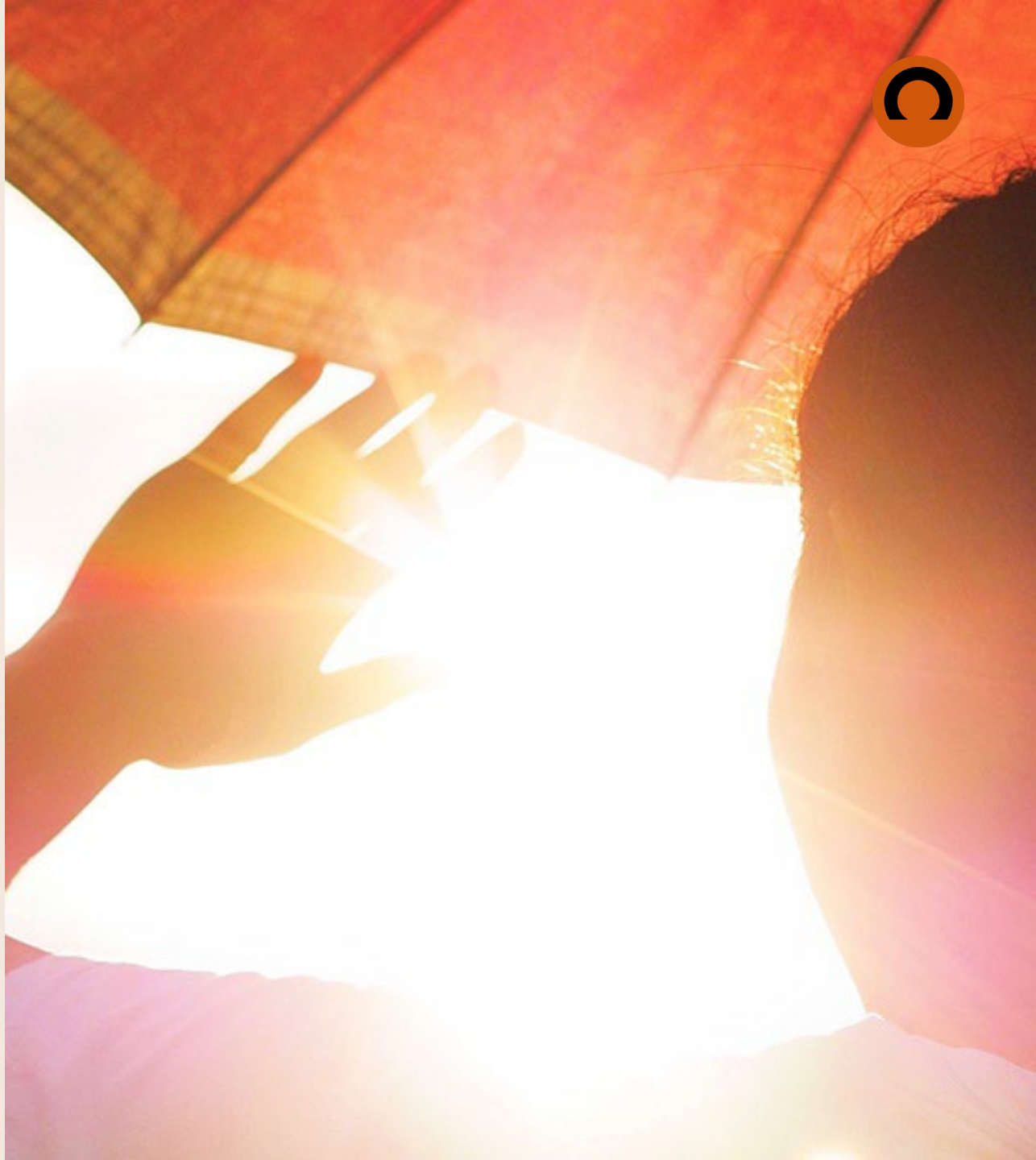
- Real time learning and adaptation
- A holistic view: inner work and external shifts.
- Collects structured data which can be readily analysed.

Limitations

- Limited to what gets logged
- Logs vary in strength of evidence

What rigour looks like in CNM

- Diverse noticers, including your critics
- Rate strength of evidence and contribution
- Use the data and give feedback
- Add rubrics or Adaptive Progress Markers for judgement

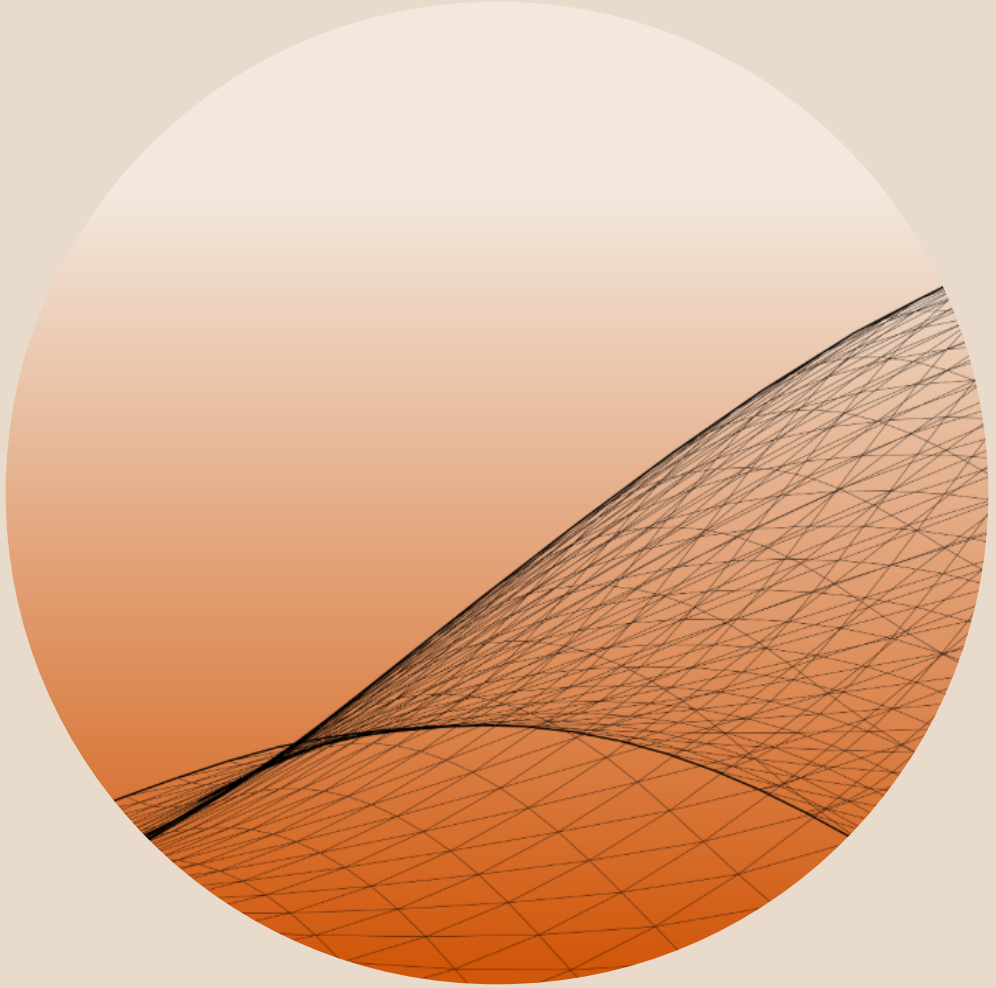


How CNM compares

	Collective Noticing Method	Most Significant Change	Outcome Harvesting
Focus	Impact, systems conditions, ways of working, learnings	Instances of impact	Outcomes and contribution
Timing	Continuous, in real time	Ongoing story collection	Usually retrospective, one-off study
Evidence	Short, multi-perspective logs; diverse evidence types, rated for SOE and contribution	Narrative stories, selected	Outcome statements, substantiated
Who contributes	Implementers, partners, networks, people with lived experience	Depends on how it is designed, mostly staff and participants of a program	Harvester with informants
Primary use	Collective sensemaking and adaptive action	Meaning and dialogue	Contribution claims

Power, participation and decolonising potential

Sharing power, and broadening who gets to define what matters and what counts as evidence.



Participation and lived experience

- Inherently participatory
- Values lived experience as core insight
- Shares power over what counts as evidence
- Learning-oriented and collective



How does accountability work?

- Targets and promises fail in non-linear work
- MQ Patton: accountability for learning
- Reveal what is learned, adapt wisely
- As needed, add rubrics, synthesis studies or Adaptive Progress Markers

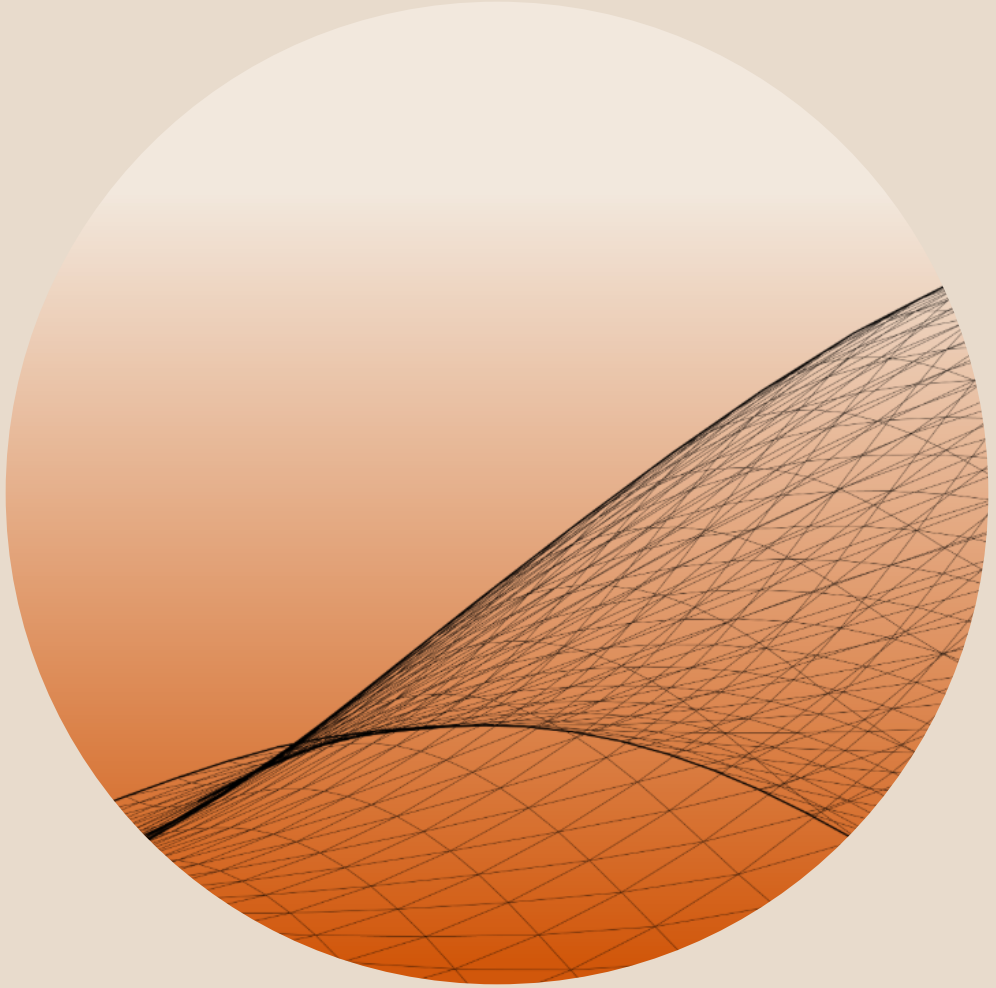


Complementary approaches

Theories of progress

Adaptive progress markers

Rubrics



Complementary tools

Theories of Progress

Getting clear on how you expect change to unfold, and the trajectories

Adaptive Progress Markers

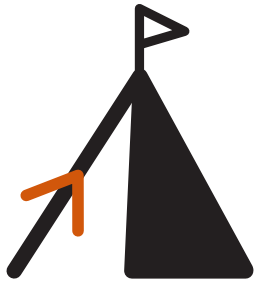
An alternative to SMART targets, to keep you from strategic drift.

Rubrics

To get clarity on how complex change looks, and to track your progress



Theories of Progress



Mountain

Steady, continuous climb towards the goal



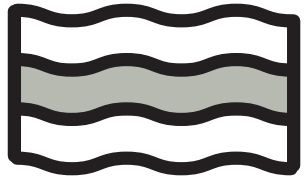
Hockey stick

Slow start, then acceleration



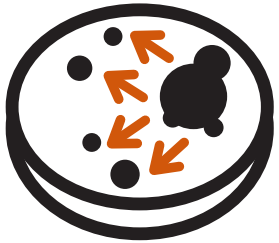
Zig-zag

Progress with breakthroughs and setbacks, sometimes reversal



Tiramisu

Layered progress: laying conditions first, then systemic shifts, then widespread change



Petri dish

Change spreads outward from small pockets or centers, forming visible attractors

Adaptive Progress Markers

- Adaptive targets to help bring some ability to track progress against expectations
- Often called for from execs and board, are a replacement for KPIs and introduce a shift in how accountability is understood
- Useful even when outcomes are distant



AES26 Resources

Scan the QR code for free access to the resources

What's included in the pack:

- Collective Noticing Method paper
- Introduction to Impact Logging
- Introduction to Learning Logs
- *Adaptive Progress Markers*: Tracking Progress in Emergent Initiatives
- Learning Briefs
- SIPSI Guide
- *Toolkit*: Discovery & Evaluation Tools to Support Systems Transformation

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