

5 June 2025

# **Adopting a Nonlinear Goals Mindset in M&E: A case for loosening up as we strive for sustainable and inclusive outcomes**

Leslie Waller MPH  
**Crescenda Evaluation and Strategy**

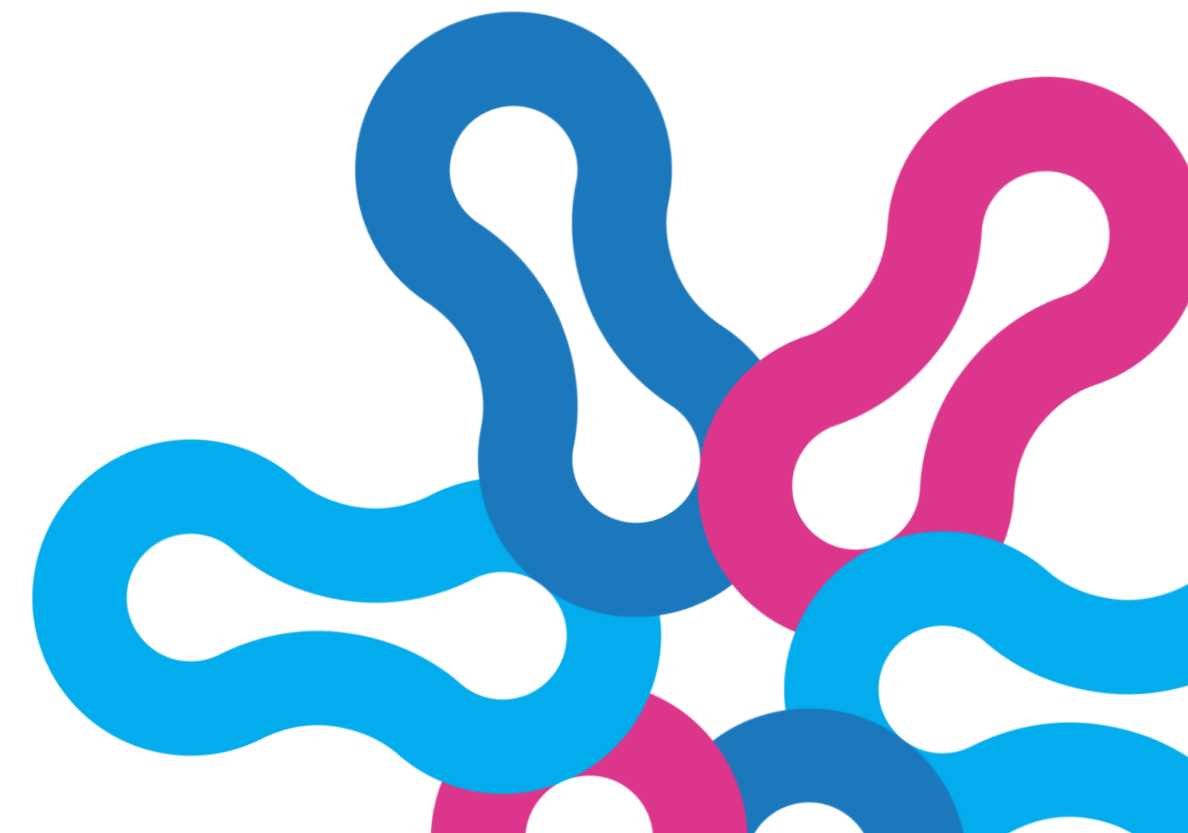
[www.glocalevalweek.org](http://www.glocalevalweek.org)



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# Outline

- I. What is nonlinear goal setting? Differences between that and the linear model we're accustomed to now?
- II. Why does this differentiation between linear and nonlinear matter? Why now?
- III. Adapting Nonlinear goal setting to M&E, development and social impact—how to enact practical, cultural and philosophical change for more sustainability and inclusivity
- IV. Summary
- V. Discussion

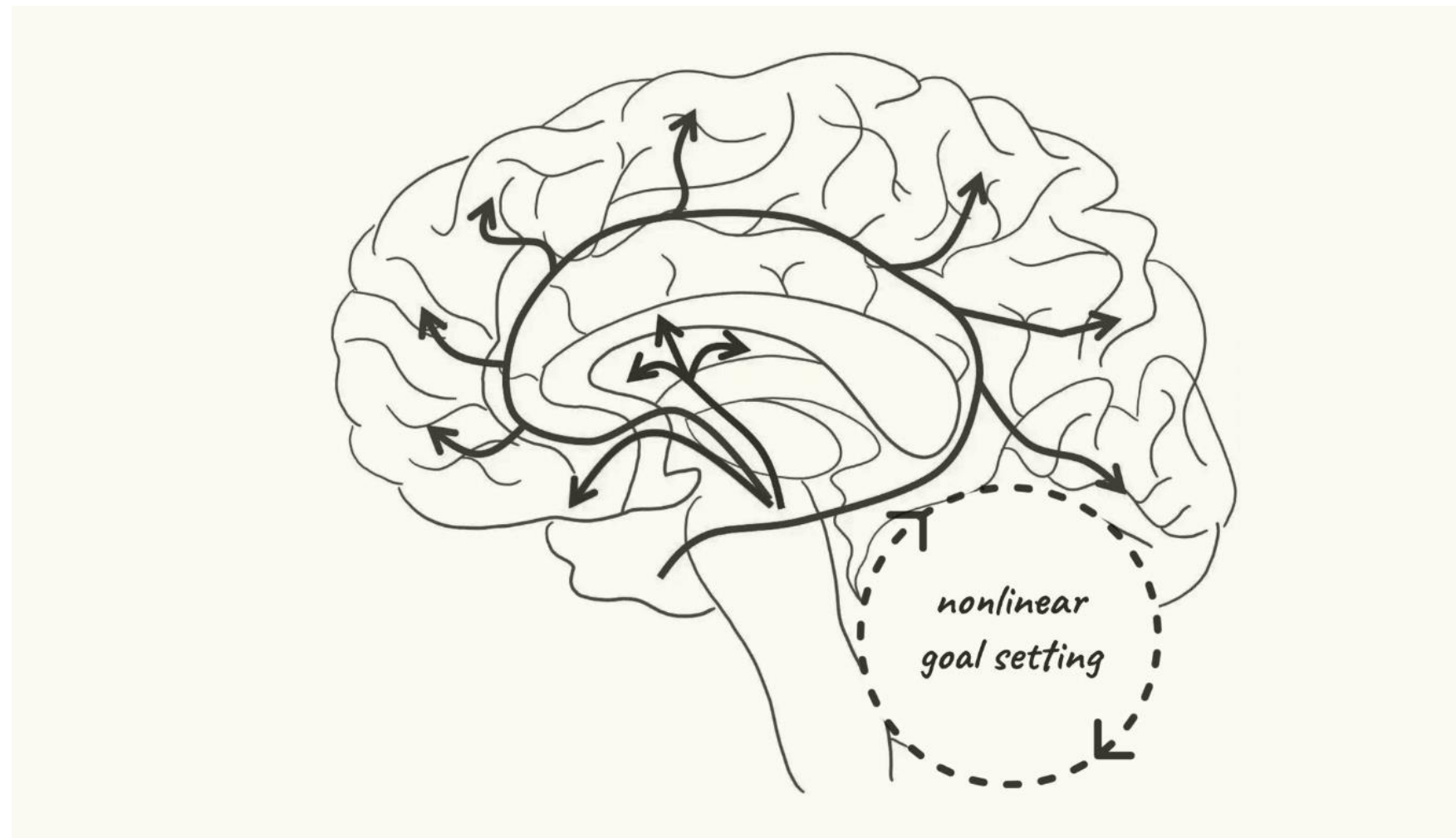


**What even is  
nonlinear goal  
setting?**



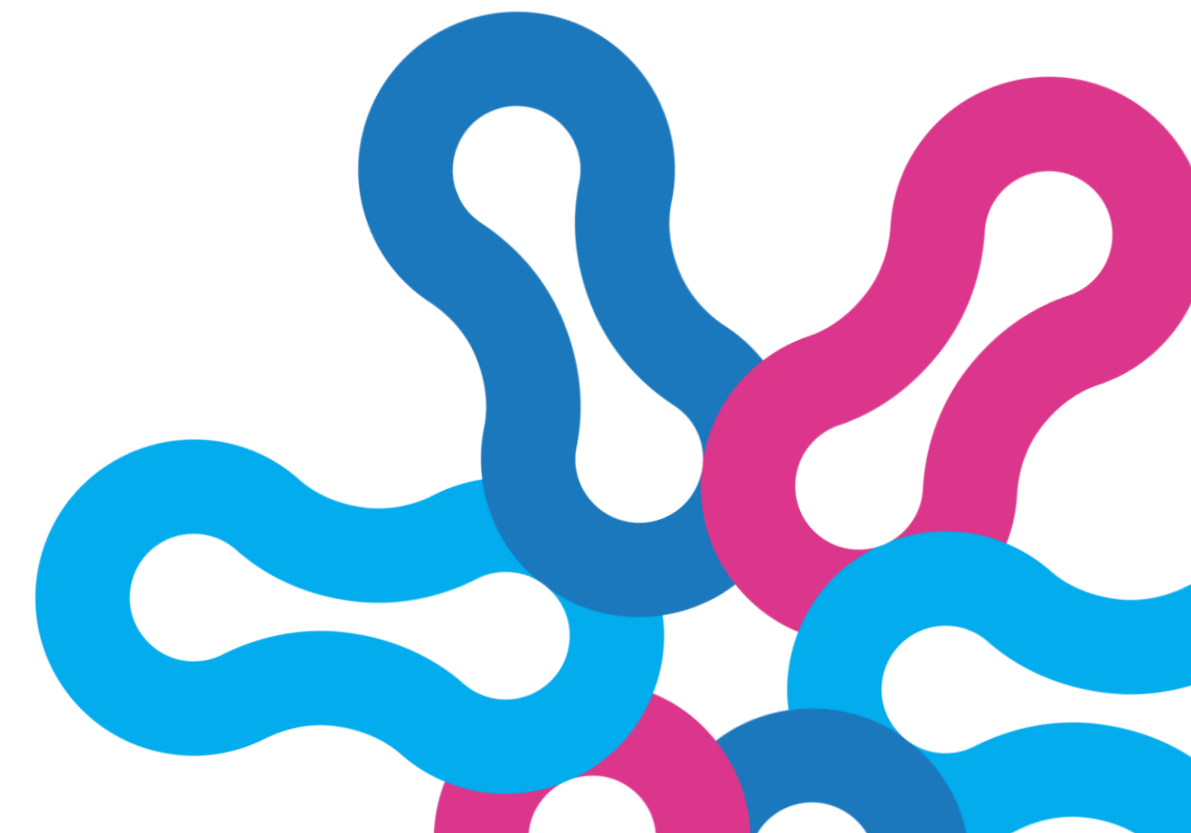
# What are we even talking about with nonlinear goal setting?

I approach nonlinear goal setting as less of a strict methodology and more so a philosophy or mindset, and possibly a set of techniques to apply to our work.



I came across this concept in a Ness Labs article that starts off with rethinking goal setting, linked here: <https://newsletter.nesslabs.com/posts/ness-labs-nonlinear-goal-setting>

Image source is the same article.

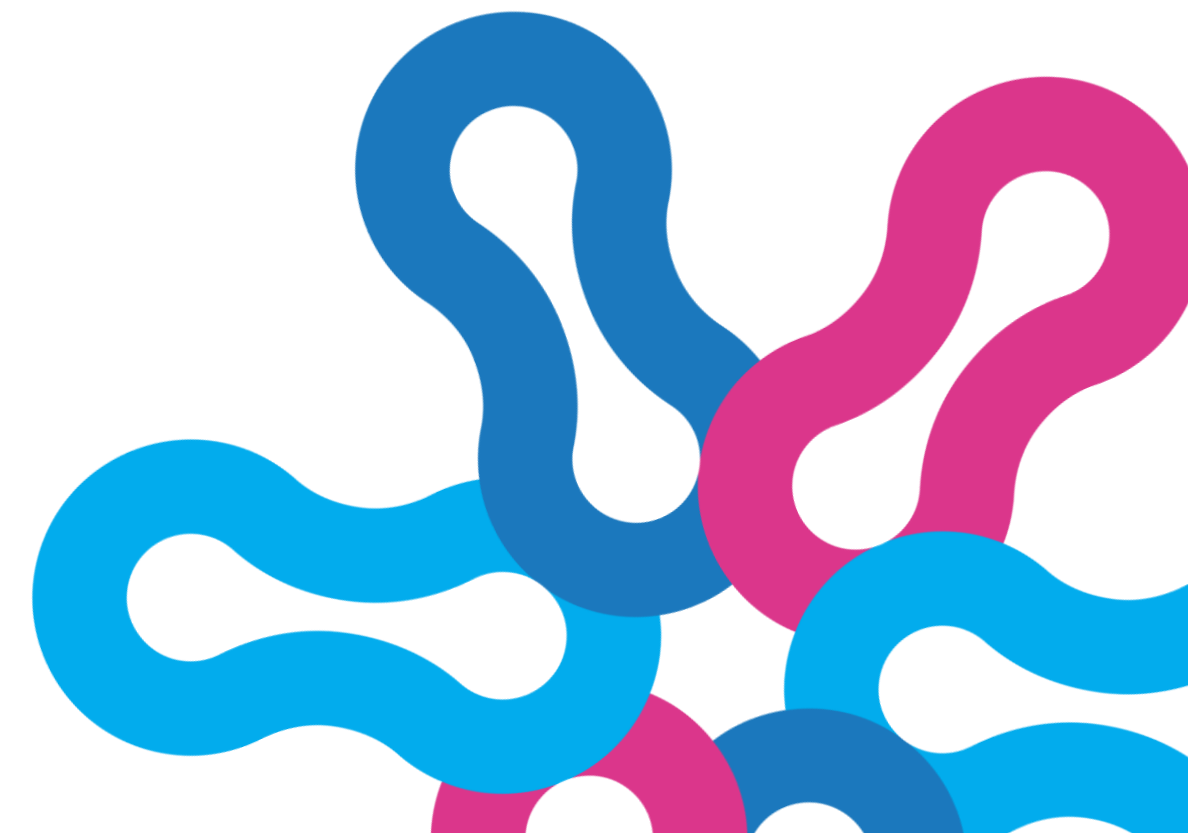


# What are we even talking about with nonlinear goal setting?

A key feature for me within nonlinear goal-setting is learning and adaptation.

Sounds familiar to many of us, right?

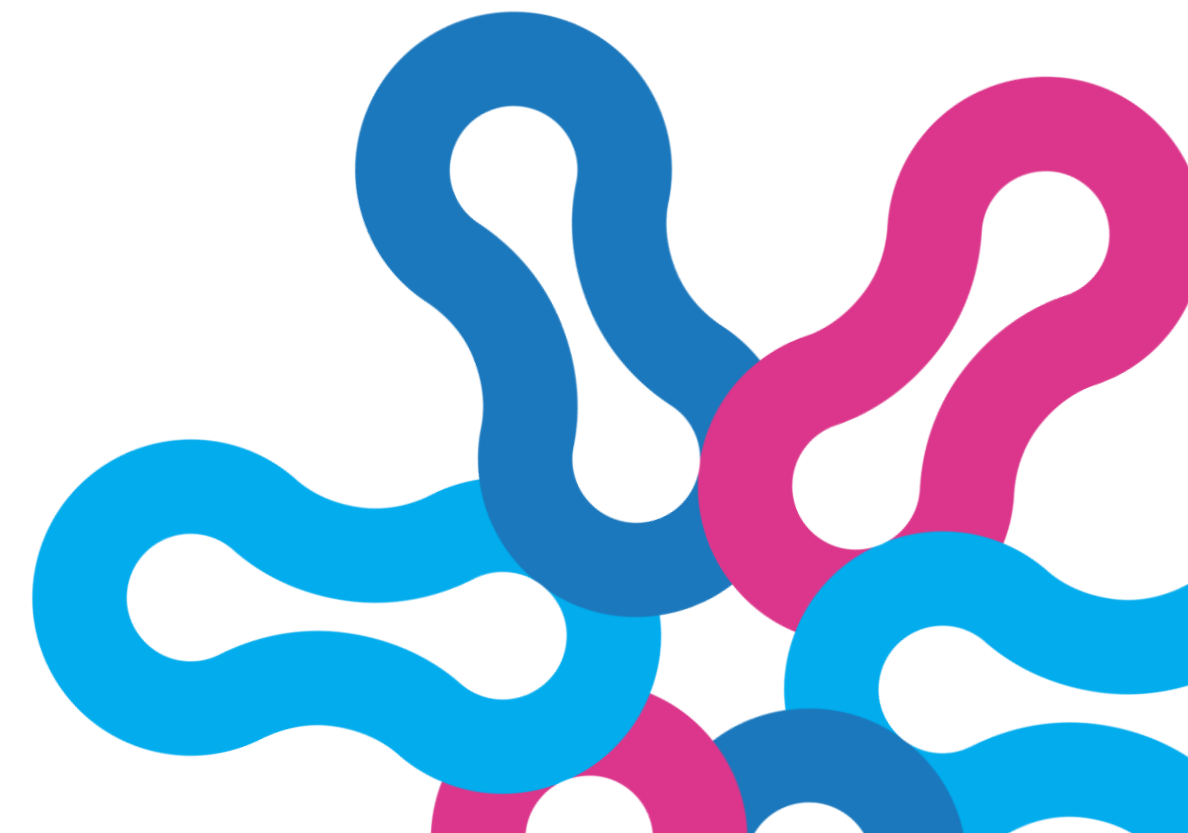
*“Nature rarely moves in straight lines, and neither does our personal and professional development. When we embrace nonlinear goal setting, we activate the brain’s reward system differently. Instead of seeking the dopamine hit of achieving a single goal, **we create multiple feedback loops that encourage exploration and sustain motivation.**”* – Anne-Laure Le Cunff, Ness Labs



# Nonlinear goal-setting contrasts with a classical, linear style of defining goals and success (the method we all know)

Linear goal-setting has been a standard in business and industrial production for decades and has been adopted by development and social impact sectors over time.

We often also associate "success" with some type of productivity, or other quantitative measure that moves in an upward trajectory.



# Nonlinear goal-setting contrasts with a classical, linear style of defining goals and success (the method we all know)



Does success here...

?

=



...mean the same thing as success here?

# A Look at SMART Goals

We know 'em, we love 'em, but are they sometimes like forcing a square peg into a round hole?

So, what do they do for us?

Most research acknowledges that they spur behavior and performance, thus bringing greater "success" to the organization

*“Linear goals dominate our approach to personal and professional lives. They offer a reassuring sense of clarity and measurability that our brains can find deeply appealing. That might be why the SMART goal-setting framework, introduced in the 1980s, is still used in companies around the world to this day.”* – Anne-Laure Le Cunff, Ness Labs

# A Look at SMART Goals

And how might they work against us?

- Evidence suggests that **people sacrifice quality goals for quantity goals** because they're easier to achieve and measure.
- **Short-term gain, long-term pain** can be a result of timeframes that are unrealistic.
- **Goals can also be unintentionally seen as ceilings**, which can be limiting.
- **Risk can be altered**—sometimes this creates risk aversion and sometimes it promotes excessive risk taking.
- Having strict goals can **impact the application of morals, ethics, and values** in our jobs.
- They can **negatively impact intrinsic motivation**, which is important for sustainability and inclusivity in social impact and development.

# Employing SMART and linear goal mindsets can have big impacts on how we do our work and define success.

2009 WORKING PAPER HBS WORKING PAPER SERIES

## Goals Gone Wild: The Systematic Side Effects of Over-Prescribing Goal Setting

By: Lisa D. Ordonez, Maurice E. Schweitzer, Adam D. Galinsky and [Max H. Bazerman](#)

Format: Print | Language: English | Pages: 28

"As goal setting increases extrinsic motivation, it can harm intrinsic motivation-engaging in a task for its own sake...By setting goals, managers may create a hedonic treadmill in which employees are motivated by external means and not by the intrinsic value of the job itself" (pages 14-15)

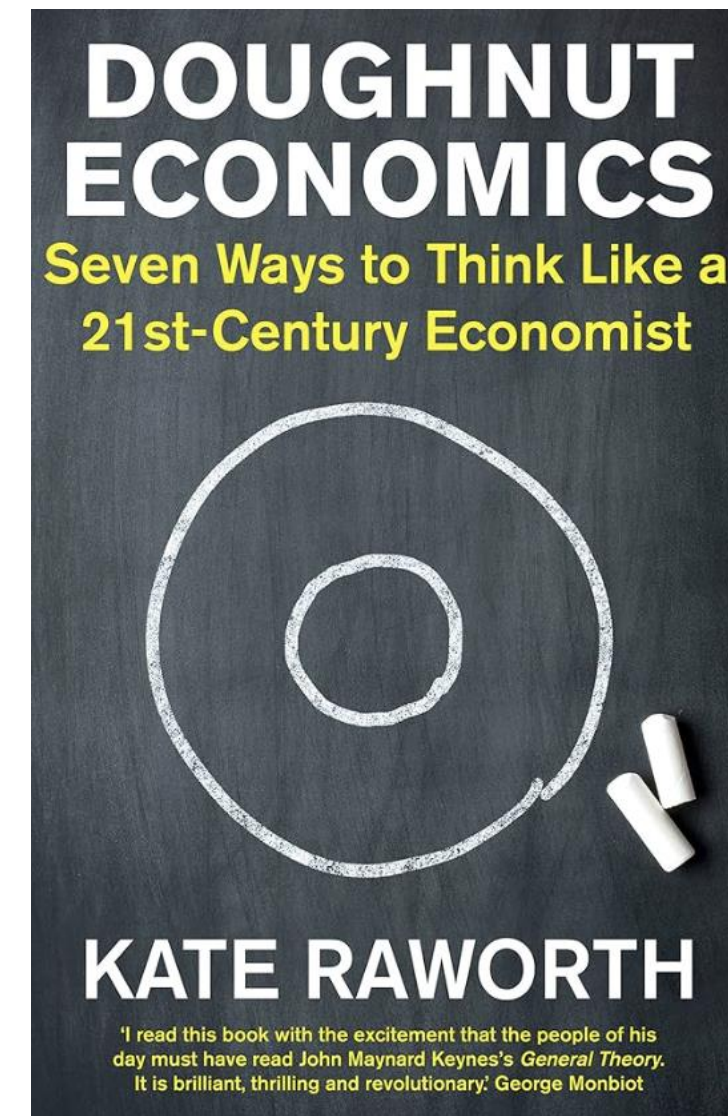
> [Perception](#). 1999;28(9):1059-74. doi: 10.1068/p281059.

## Gorillas in our midst: sustained inattentional blindness for dynamic events

D J Simons <sup>1</sup>, C F Chabris

Affiliations + expand

PMID: 10694957 DOI: [10.1068/p281059](#)



On what limits intrinsic motivation, Kate Raworth writes "they argue that when it comes to creating deep and lasting social and ecological behavior change, the most effective approach is precisely to connect with people's values and identity, not their pocket and budget." (page 107)

**We've compared  
goal-setting  
philosophies—why  
does any of this  
matter in a  
development or social  
impact context?**



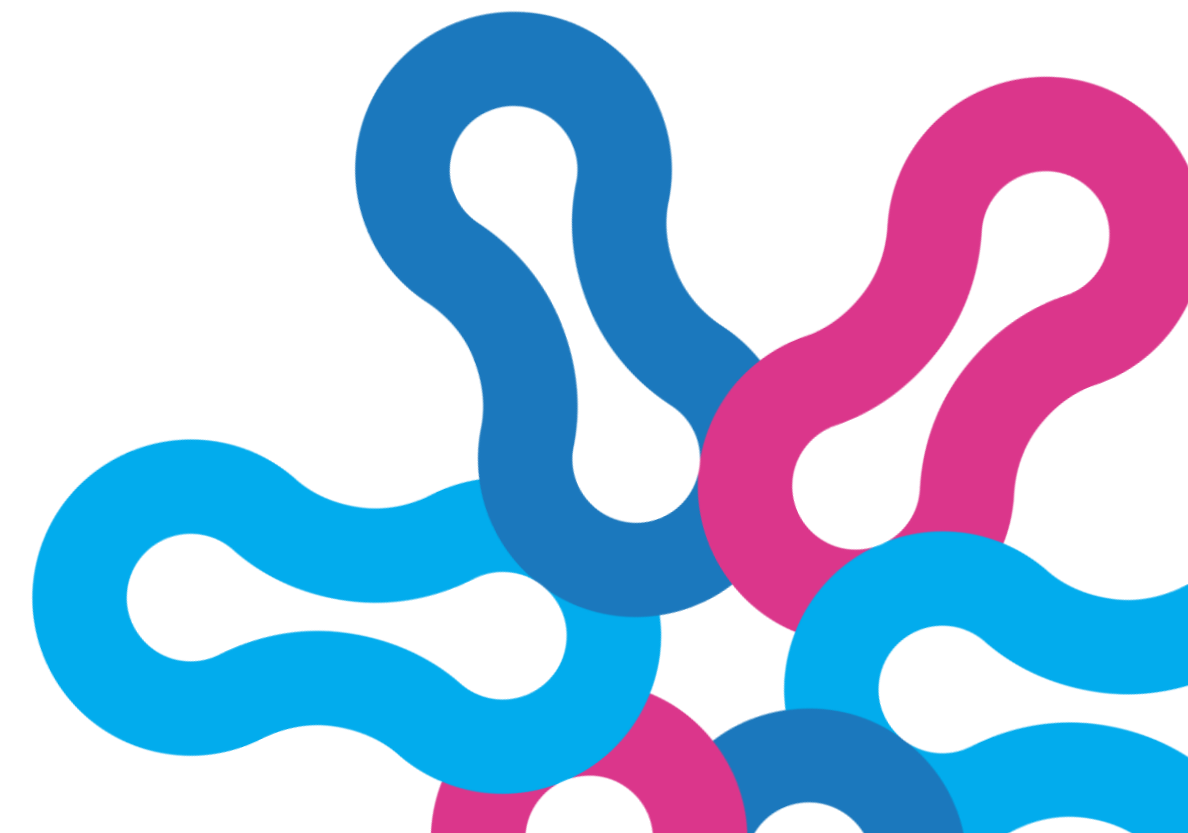
# Why do we want to nudge the narrative around goal-setting?

It might simply be an existential necessity right now.



# Why do we want to nudge the narrative around goal-setting?

Inclusive and participatory methods can clash with the perfectly organized nature of industrial-style goal setting.



# Why do we want to nudge the narrative around goal-setting?

We're at a time when funding models and sources are rapidly changing and thus poised to respond to longstanding calls to shift more money into local hands and make it less-restricted.



## Multi-Year, Unrestricted Funding

**Long-term flexible funding allows organizations to allocate resources where they are most needed, making room for innovation, emergence, and impact.**

From the trust-based philanthropy project:  
<https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/multi-year-unrestricted-funding>



CENTER  
FOR  
GLOBAL  
DEVELOPMENT

<https://www.cgdev.org/blog/challenge-localization>

BLOG POST

## The Challenge of Localization

This post from Center for Global Development and its associated paper set out 5 strategies for better localization, including creating a sense of mission around the effort and evaluating the localization efforts as data on effectiveness of localization efforts is thin.

**Ok, I'm intrigued.  
How do I use M&E as  
a tool to prompt this  
type of philosophy  
change in our field?**



# How do we change the goal setting culture in social impact and development through M&E?

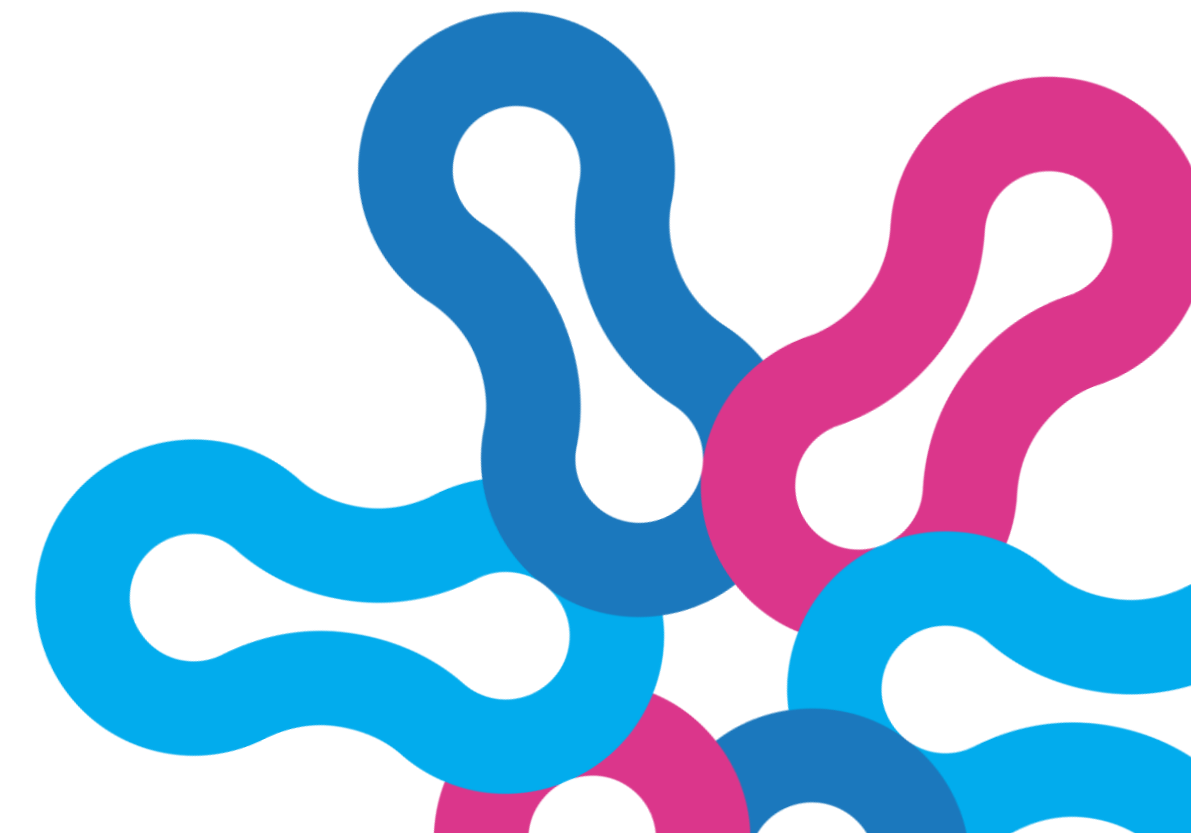
1. By producing evidence through learning and research that is useful and meaningful.
  - a. Start with an edited or pared down logframe or theory of change.
  - b. Use methodologies like outcome harvesting and contribution analysis.
  - c. For QI, use lightly-guided, open-ended feedback mechanisms that are reviewed on a routine basis.
  - d. Participatory evaluation and community-driven data collection can be really helpful.
  - e. Use thematic analyses.



# How do we change the goal setting culture in social impact and development through M&E?



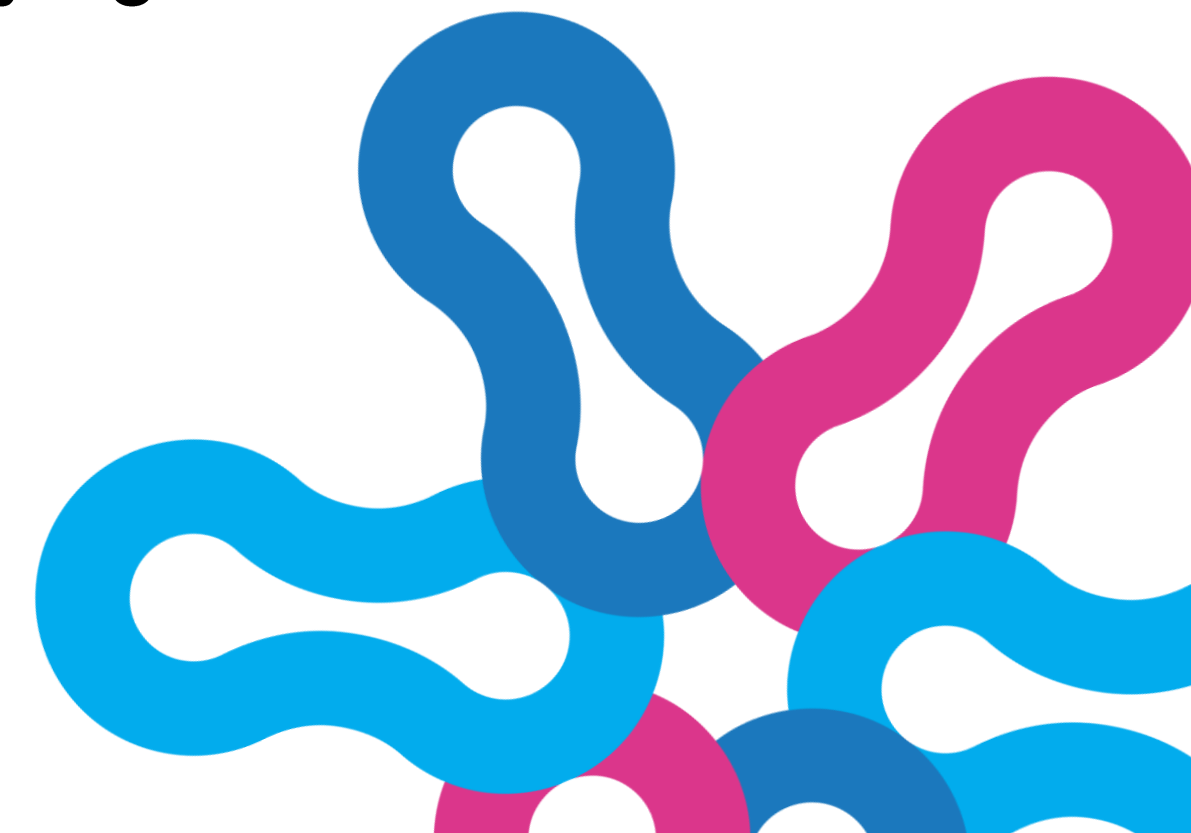
<https://coactproject.eu/news/participatory-evaluation-for-sustainable-social-transformation-the-coact-co-evaluation-whitepaper/>



# How do we change the goal setting culture in social impact and development through M&E?

2. Use this evidence to guide and build consensus among stakeholders.

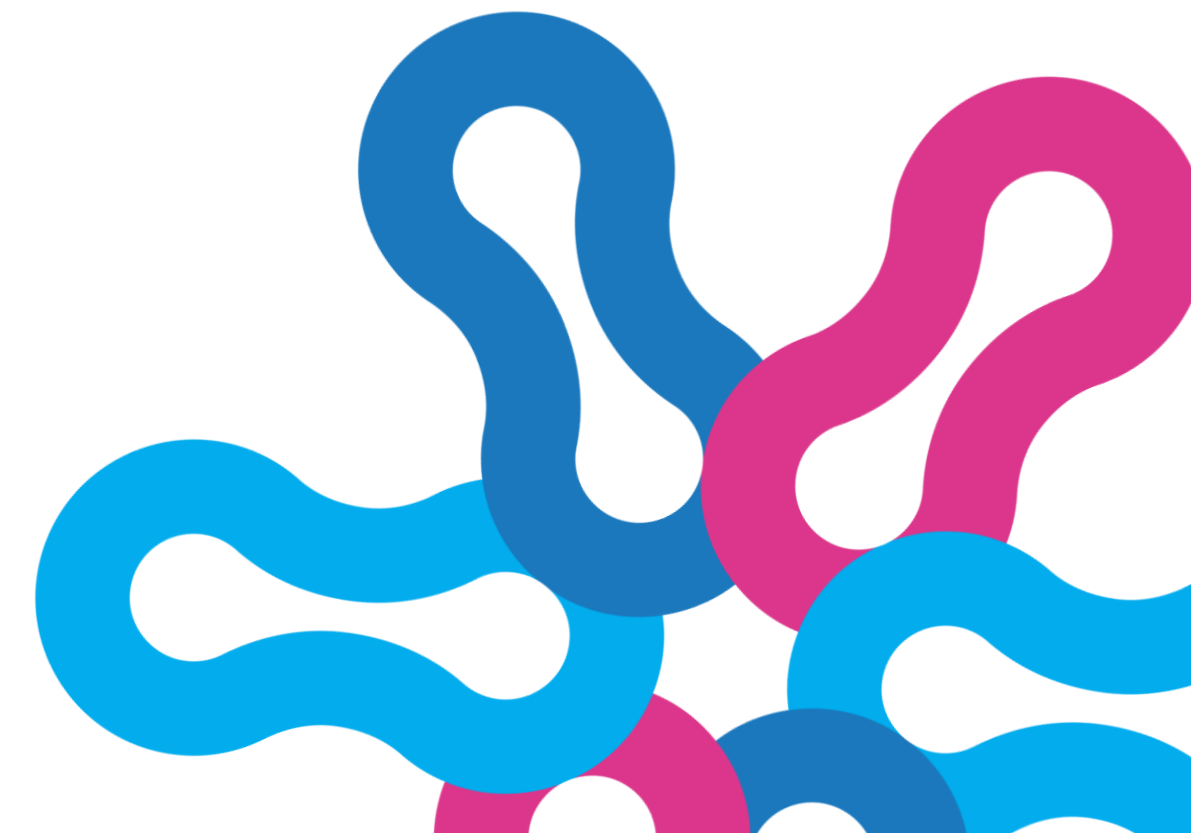
- a. Try a consensus-building workshop or process.
- b. Employ a stakeholder-focused SWOT exercise.
- c. Remember clear communication when sharing data and research, especially when presenting to a wide audience. Lose the jargon as much as possible.



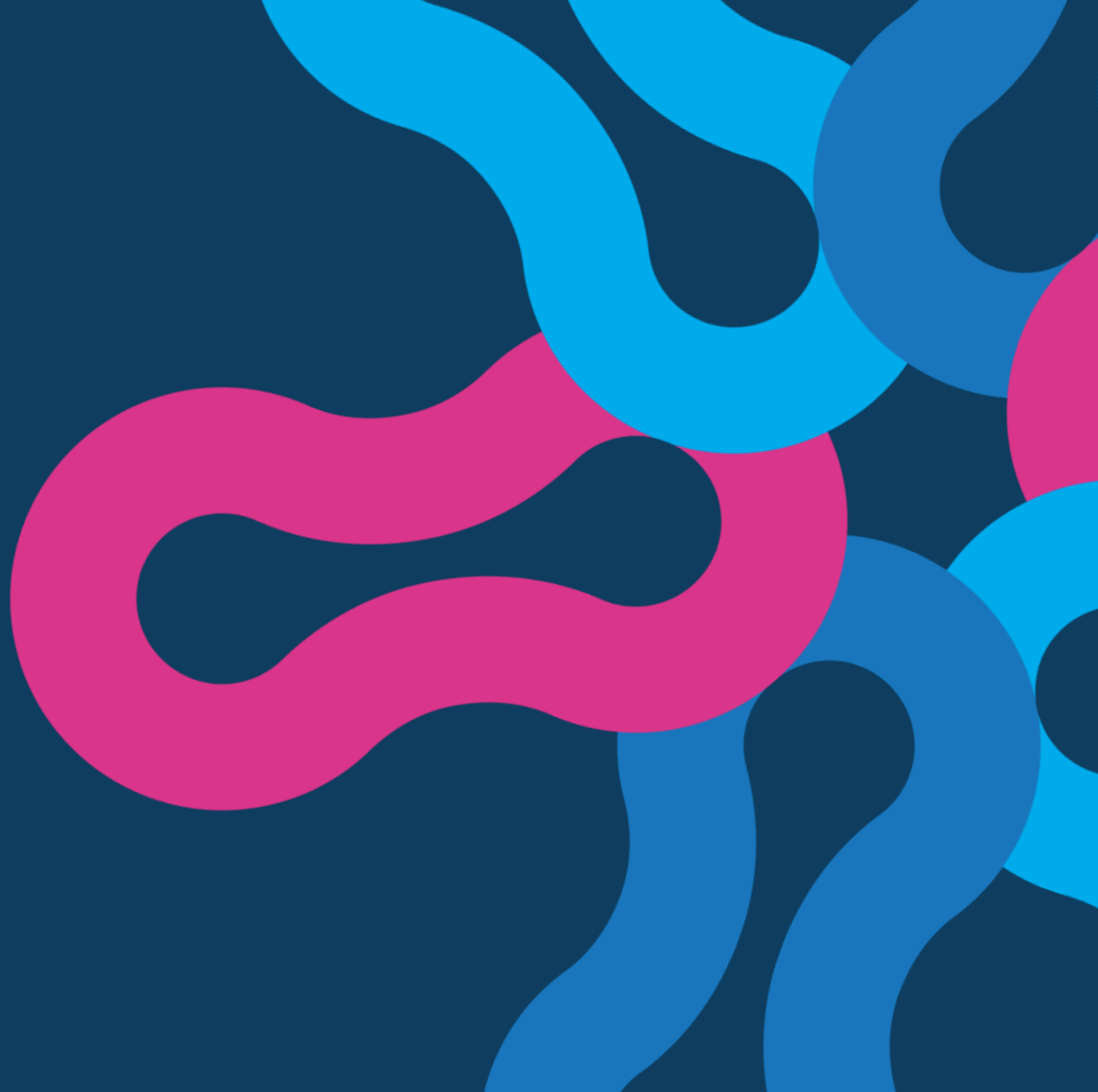
# How do we change the goal setting culture in social impact and development through M&E?

## 3. Allow intrinsic motivation to drive learning opportunities

- a. Share the work with all stakeholders.
- b. Engage communities and funders with updates and presentations mid-project.
- c. Take feedback seriously and openly.



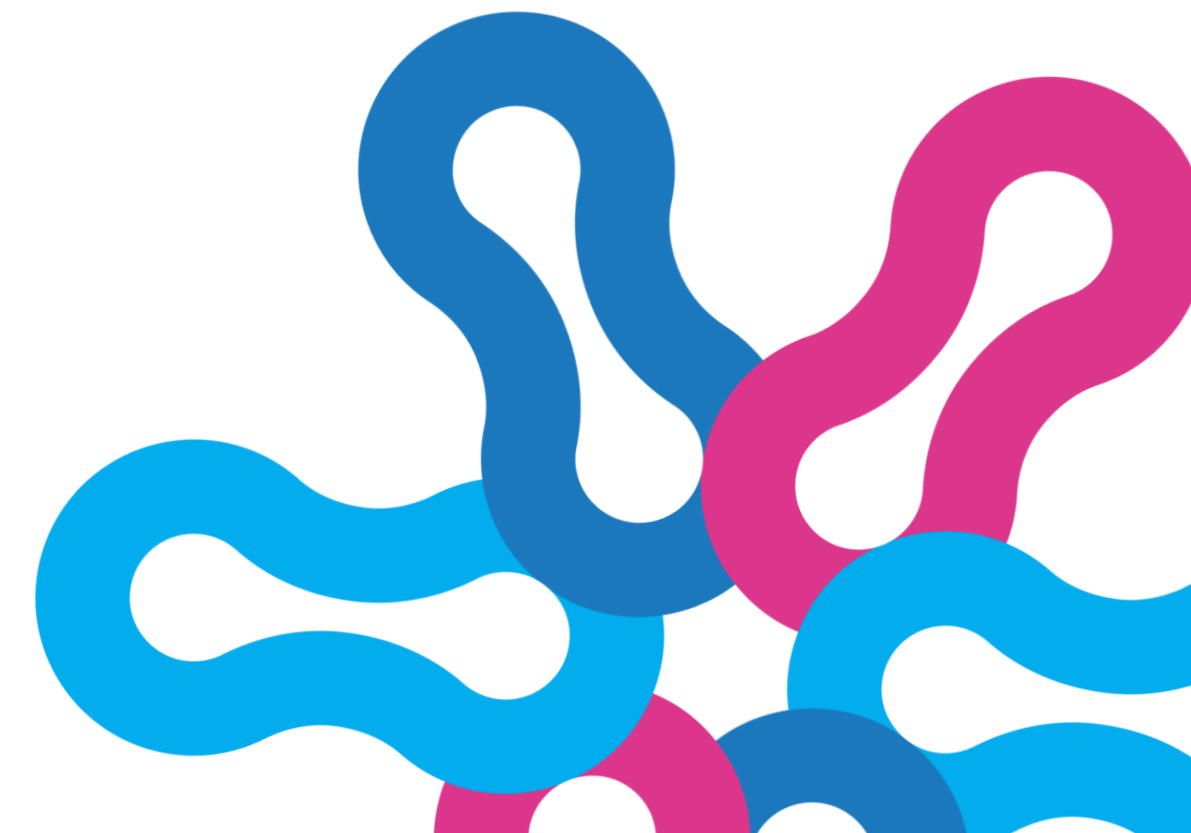
**Let's summarize and  
then discuss. A shift  
like this requires  
broad input and  
thoughts!**



# What did we just discuss?

We looked at changing how we set goals and how we measure success in our work to bring about more sustainable and inclusive positive change.

1. We reviewed the history of linear and SMART goals.
2. We looked at the difference between linear and nonlinear goals, and what we can take from a nonlinear mindset.
3. We covered some tools that we as evaluators and users of M&E data can employ to bring more sustainable, meaningful, and inclusive change to the communities we wish to serve.



# Discussion Points...

I'd prefer the audience drive the direction of the conversation, but in case we're a quiet group...

Discussion prompts:

- Have you seen this nonlinear concept before?
- How does thinking in this way make you feel? Nervous? Liberated? Scared? Empowered?
- Does this mindset shift impact your work at all, especially in terms of using qualitative learning, research and evaluation?
- Do you see the broader impact and development field being receptive to letting go of SMART goals and heavily-defined logframes when they don't fully serve the community or project?



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