



DEAR WHITE  
people WHEN A BLACK  
PERSON TELLS  
YOU SOMETHING IS  
OFFENSIVE OR RACIST  
YOU DON'T GET TO SAY  
IT'S NOT! LISTEN!

# Who Sets The Metrics For Assessing Black-Led Initiatives?

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A literature review

# About the authors

Paul Addae (BA, MA) is a graduate of The School of Oriental and African Studies. He has conducted research over the last 15 years in some of the most challenging and volatile environments.

He has co-produced research with professors from Georgetown University, Exeter University and St Andrews University. He has also worked on EU projects around effective solutions to some social phenomena. Paul is also a fluent classical Arabic speaker and has translated many works into English.

Shaun Danquah (BA, MA) is the founder and Director of Innovation at Centric. He has 15 years' experience in conducting research across hostile environments. This began in 2004 with his involvement in founding the Clapham Park Project, which was part of a £56 million regeneration scheme. He also worked on government programmes and on Los Angeles gang intervention initiatives, delivering workshops on best practice. His work led him to partner with Google, Ideo and YouTube. As a result of his work, he has successfully established networks across various underserved communities.

Paul and Shaun have worked jointly over the last 15 years on different research assignments in the US and UK.



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# Introduction

There are a range of metrics utilised by funding bodies, organisations, and government departments for judging and assessing initiatives and interventions, some of which have the main focus of working with black and minority ethnic groups within the urban locale. This has led to knee-jerk giving, which is often reactionary and devoid of any scrutiny of the metrics invoked to distribute such funding. This effectively unlocks resources with the language of reparations yet devoid of any meaningful criteria.

Further to this, some metrics are geared towards organisations at the granular level, which leads to these community organisations becoming accountable to funding regimes rather than to the communities which they serve. This hampers any authentic prospect of 'power shifting' as these metrics merely become tools by which community organisations are controlled from a distance.

As researchers who hail from black communities, we are keen to understand what exactly is the basis for such 'metrics' and the criteria by which they are formulated, especially when adherence to them is demanded from communities at the granular level. There needs to be an interrogation of how these interventions can be judged via metrics that do not take into consideration the requisite familiarity with the context and culture. If this is not understood, then on what basis is funding given or withheld? As Denzin and Giardina opined in their book *Qualitative Inquiry and the Politics of Evidence*: "we must create our own standards of quality, our own criteria" (2008: 12).



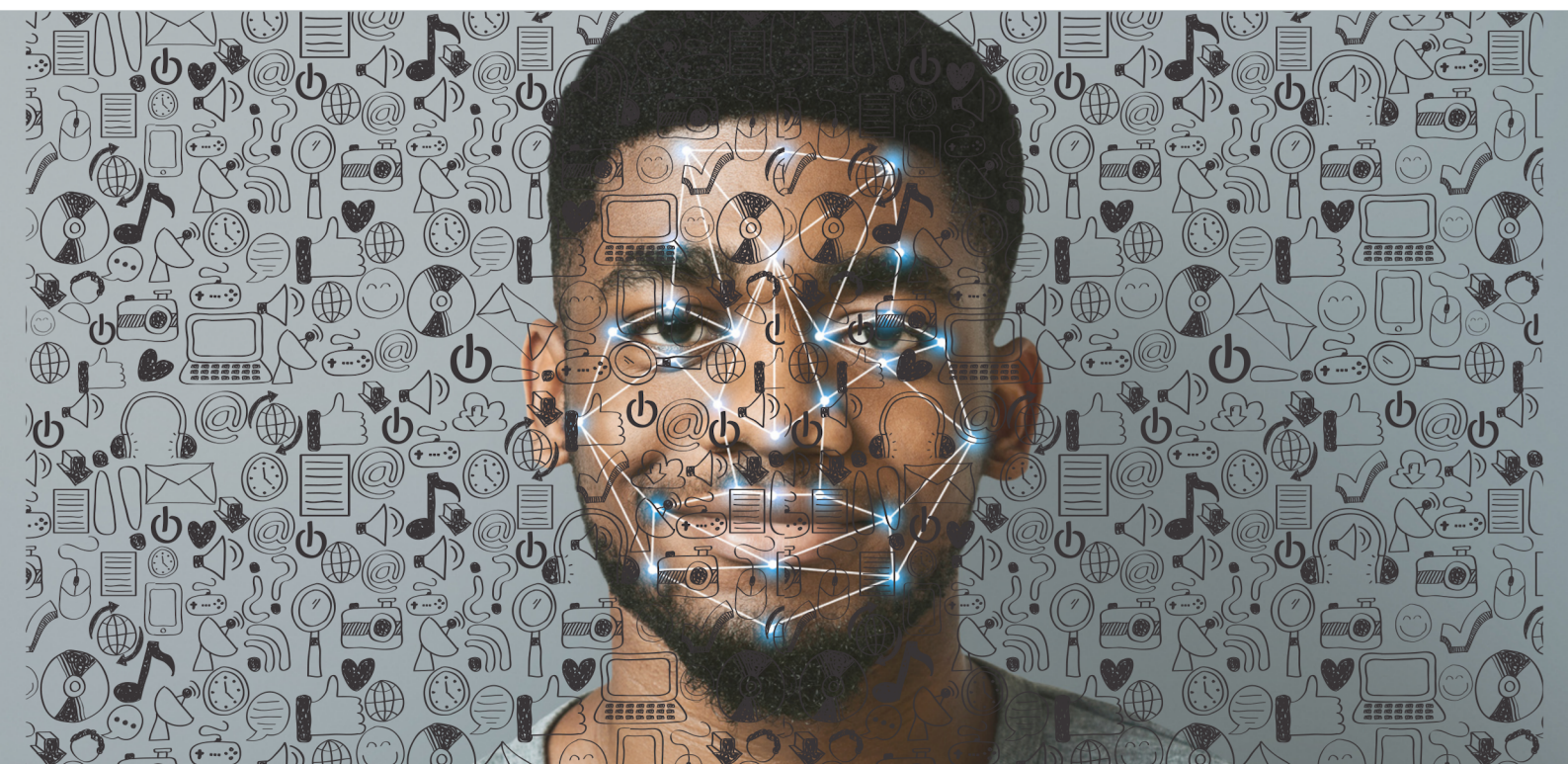
# Why Deconstruct Metrics?

In our research over the last four years, we have realised that in order for our findings to have a stronger impact, we have to seriously consider how we disseminate and spread our research. Further to this, we had to look beyond citations of our work to also giving attention to whether our research is being discussed, shared, and highlighted across social media and in the broader public domain. So essentially, we had already viewed the significance of what is known as 'alternative metrics', or 'Altmetrics'.

'Altmetrics' is concerned with the attention given to research outputs in non-traditional sources as an indicator of the impact of research. Also included in this are indicators of broader attention given to your research, whether in policy papers, Wikipedia citations, news reports etc. Looking at metrics in this way allows us to reconsider how metrics are set, by whom, why, and their relevance.

The notion of rethinking metrics has been discussed by several commentators who have noted that the current framing of metrics is increasingly limited. Elizabeth Gadd, for instance, has articulated the notion of 'responsible metrics', noting that when metrics are used in the evaluation of research, they should be utilised responsibly to 'mitigate against perverse effects and unintended consequences' (2019). Indeed, Frost (2021: 3) notes, in the context of the public sector, how attempts to 'quantify' the 'quality' of organisations is not only an expensive endeavour which leads to focusing away from core aims but also "causes distress to many well-motivated professionals". While Gadd (2019) alluded to the case of a professor at a London university who became so stressed at reaching a metric regarding a grant income target of £200,000 per annum, that he committed suicide.

Kordowicz (2023) has also discussed that there are assumptions that quality, whether of performance or of the efficacy of a project, can be captured via metrics. As metrics seldom provide us with context.



# Metrics and Inequity

Although metrics are required to guide improvement activities and identify areas needing enhancement, Villanueva (2021: 76) highlights that laborious applications and reporting requirements keep many worthy groups, which possess vital local knowledge, from applying.

As a result of this, the usual suspects acquire abundant funds largely due to their cultural capital, enabling them to navigate the middle-class realm of incentives or sanctions implicit in the measurements accompanying such funding. Meanwhile, those that do apply bend over backwards to shoehorn their concepts in tandem with particular 'metrics' and lose out, as competition rather than collaboration or cooperation is the logical outcome.

Often, funding is obtained by white-led organisations "adept at creating glossy promotional materials and/or whose leaders have extensive Rolodexes that grant them more access to funders" (Villanueva, 2021: 75). Funders may shroud themselves in being objective and rigorous, all the while it is totally unbeknown to them that they are perpetuating inequity with their judgments of small organisations often led by people of colour.



Moreover, new and unheard voices need to be brought around the table with fresh ideas and fresh thinking, who understand 'the dialectic of the council estate' and are able to continuously work within sometimes volatile communities and build the capacity of local people. In this regard, Villanueva (2021: 75) mentions:

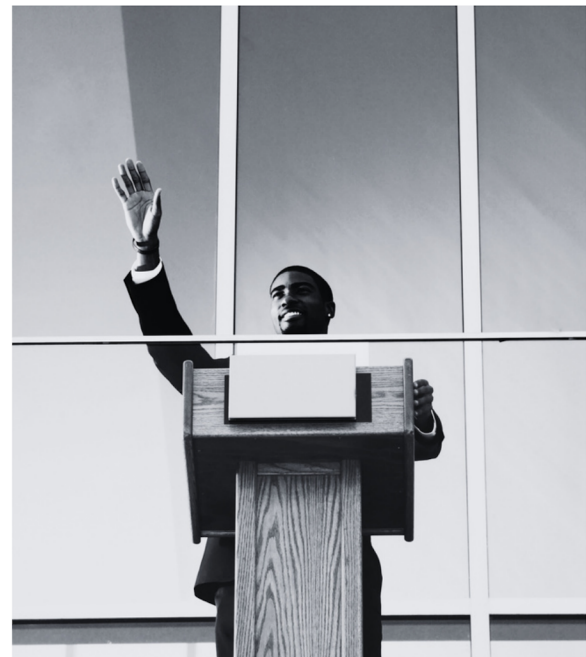
**"Many groups that are actually based in disadvantaged communities and led by locals are told, "You don't have the data; you don't have the track record; you're not big enough; you're not scalable; you don't align with the strategies we crafted after spending two years on strategic planning," as Vu Le puts it."**

## Metrics and Inequity

Taylor (2011b: 295) in her paper "Community Participation in the Real World" also mentions that some community groups can be excluded by 'the rules of the game' and a select cohort of 'acceptable voices' can solely be heard. Via such means, power-holders construct the 'community' in a palatable manner which suits their own image and thereby indulge in 'recruiting people like themselves into their partnerships' (Taylor, 2011b: 296). The repercussion of this is that people may be recruited who merely fit a previously set mould.

The power-holders, despite displaying the optics of inclusion, still demonstrate a fear of the unknown as they sideline those whom they regard as outliers, as they may be 'too much of a wildcard'. Associating with more controllable segments of 'community representation' is often more comfortable than liaising with those seldom heard. Yet in doing so, community groups fall prey to becoming 'professionalised' by metrics and audit culture and become 'detached from their constituency by the demands of their representative role and internalising the values and purposes of their new peers' (Taylor, 2011b: 296). Nearly 20 years ago, Shirlow and Murtagh (2004) had already expressed cynicism towards community representatives who determine what is best for their communities without even the most minimal of meaningful consultation. Such approaches are a revisiting of the colonial era with its paternalism and sifting through communities in order to identify those open to roll-out policies (Mayo, 2011: 75-77).

What happens here is that gatekeepers from black and minority ethnic groups, not necessarily in touch with emerging trends at the granular level, occupy agendas which require the insights of those with closer proximity to detect what is going on below the radar. If this is not addressed, it leaves a gap for others to fill. In other reflections, we have also discussed this, that there is often a policy disconnect when technocratic top-down policies, initiatives, and interventions are rolled out without being conducive to the lived experiences of those seldom heard. Participation-washing may then be used as a consultation proxy to justify support for plans, which some consider highly controversial, which radically impact the urban space, as has been seen with recent discourses around the '15 Minute City', LTNs, ULEZ, and Smart Cities.



# Metrics, Audit Creep and the Politics of Meeting Targets

Evaluation metrics can be understood to be measurement indicators and include data: on progress towards achieving business objectives and plans that can be tracked in real-time; socio-demographic data; input/impact indicators for policy decision-making and service delivery assessment (Ruppert, 2015: 134). Ruppert (2015) notes that evaluation metrics have been utilised by the state as measurements of the consequences of government transactions such as meetings, expenses, programme costs that implement policies on the economy or population health.

Metrics are similar to the measurements that form an audit, and increasing audit creep began in the 1980s, as noted by Power (1999), as a means of further control and transparency. Yet when there is such focus on audits, the onus of benchmarks and indicators is placed on the performer rather than the checker. Responsibility is placed on 'complying' and on 'monitoring' and 'reporting' on its activities. These become 'ritualized practices of verification', as Power refers to them (1999: 14).



The term 'audit' up to the mid-1980s was reserved for financial accountancy, but then became far broader in its application to cover socio-political 'accountancy' of professional organisations. This led to auditing becoming a dominant profession (Perkin, 1989). In this way, as Kagan et al. (2011: 329) note, financial audits grew from the material world and into the social. So now there are 'place audits', 'environmental audits', 'health and safety audits', etc. Kagan et al. (2011: 329-330) outline,

Described in less politically neutral terms, the audit as a social practice first shifted from management, where it was used primarily to assess the financial 'health' of the private corporation, to the 'value for money' delivered by public institutions, to then become a political tool of neo-liberal governmentality which signified an ideological shift from government directly managing the activities of social institutions to social institutions self-monitoring and self-regulating within broader parameters set by both state and market.

## Metrics, Audit Creep and the Politics of Meeting Targets



They continue (2011: 330):

In the UK, this widened role for audit particularly caught hold during early 1980s under political reforms undertaken by the Thatcher government which planned to reduce public expenditure through promoting efficiencies in the state by subjecting public institutions (such as education, health care, housing and social services) to the disciplines of the 'free market' in the belief that this would engender a new culture of fiscal responsibilities and efficiency gains. The audit culture has directly contributed to the growth in evaluation research.

The fact that this developed during the Thatcherite years is telling. At the same time, those from working-class backgrounds who became upwardly socially mobile, known as 'C2s', were effectively neutralised in terms of their political activity by getting onto property ladders, weakened trade unions, and becoming beholden to the banks. The political discourse around rights became slowly eroded, leading to an intellectual gap within the working-class locale.

The dearth of political outlets would make way, years later, for rage as witnessed in various forms of political protest, with rioting and Brexit standing out as the starkest. This then provided an entry point for black middle-class gentrified entities to then assume the role, and the voice, of the urban locale and then preside over funding, etc. This then paved the way for organisations to come to fruition with those well-versed in audit culture at the helm.

Hence, this growing 'audit culture' attains, as Bourdieu articulated, a 'symbolic capital' which is the preserve of funding bodies, academic institutions, statutory bodies and grant organisations, is adhered to uncritically, and then community organisations are expected to follow suit and thereby become extensions of, in a Foucauldian framework, neoliberal governmentality. Efficient and effective outputs are replaced by a 'politics of meeting targets' (Healey, 2006). Frost (2021: 3) notes in his book "The Myth of Measurement: Inspection, Audit, Targets and the Public Sector":

**Audit culture produces proxy measures which become fetishised and can have a negative impact on service delivery.**



## Metrics, Audit Creep and the Politics of Meeting Targets

Funding generally is associated with this audit culture (Larner, 2003; Nowland-Foreman, 1998), which emphasises tick-box exercises and symbolic reporting rather than a focus on meaningful change and resolving real-world problems (Townsend and Townsend, 2004; Owczarzak, 2016). One of the most important reasons for this has been a neo-liberal approach to local economic development. Beer et al. (2005: 51), for instance, highlight in their paper "Neoliberalism and the Institutions for Regional Development in Australia" that:

As such, the role of government is in setting the rules of governance. In the case of regional development, for instance, it is the state which decides how much money is to be made available, for which time period, to which types of devolved agency, and what policy remit each agency should be given. In effect, the state has retained a disciplinary power over how it allocates funding and responsibilities, a process which has seen the rise of the audit culture and a proliferation of short-term experiments that can be closed, cloned or converted into different approaches.



Audit cultures and associated metrics compel organisations to be accountable more to funders than to the communities they serve. This can be an issue, as Poyntz notes (2018: 293):

The challenge here is that teaching creative media expression with young people does not easily lend itself to rationalisation and the quantification of outcomes.

While Taylor (2011b: 295) notes that:

At the most simple level, the demands of monitoring crowd out other activities and shape the way in which activities are legitimated.

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## Metrics, Audit Creep and the Politics of Meeting Targets



The suggestion from these commentators is that this monitoring led to a risk-averse approach which then facilitated underspend, the stifling of innovation and placing premiums on conformity with metrics and 'tried and tested methods' which conform to notions of 'best practice'. Moreover, the trickle-down effect is that at the granular level community organisations are compelled to collate time-consuming data and metrics which are often quite irrelevant to their lived experiences or goals for their communities. In this way, power is placed into the hands of professionals, experts, bureaucrats and technocrats who conduct and 'check' evaluations and measurements (Parsons, 1995). It is often by means of these actors that dominant discourses are transmitted to local authorities and communities, Taylor (2011: 142) emphasises that:

**...this growing industry is advising on how to shape funding bids, how to design governance structures, how to measure achievements, in ways that risk encouraging a 'normative isomorphism' which spreads the new managerialism through all sectors.**

Moving away from an audit culture which emphasises obscure metrics means that organisations can focus on their main activities and outputs rather than on inspection preparations or statistical data gathering.

This audit culture can limit, as Newman (2001: 163) suggests, "the scope for participation to contribute to a more open and reflexive form of governance". Frost (2021: 111) suggests that peer review for instance could be utilised wherein a panel of reviewers comprising a range of expertise within the organisation and also including service-users or experts by experience. Hence, metrics could also include the local relevance, community support for the initiative, relevance to local residents, practical utility for young people and the legacy aspect of the project.

While Milbourne (2013: 103-104) emphasises relationships based on personal, competence-based and motivational trust rather than on time-consuming audits and performance metrics. These three types of trust can form the basis of client-contractor relationships which move away from blame towards learning, and from surveillance towards supporting innovation upon which some schemes are focused on developing.

# The Repercussions for Public Health

Gomez-Temesio and Le Marcis (2021: 566) note that increased quantification and indicators have impacted the field of Global Health. They give the example of the Ebola Epidemic, where in Guinea, the World Health Organisation (WHO) produced daily information on how many people were cared for at Ebola treatment units, how many confirmed cases, how many deaths, and how many contacts were lost to follow-up, etc. However, these indicators did not adequately capture the population's experiences. In fact, they seemed to be more focused on the biosecurity of the Global North, protecting it from threats from the Global South, rather than on providing care and medical services (Gomez-Temesio and Le Marcis, 2021: 568). This is where the uncritical focus on metrics can be problematic.

Collaboration is, therefore, key in this context, and a partnership approach with institutions, as we have done with Impact on Urban Health and others, is essential for mutual learning and understanding. Currently, there appears to be a gap between projects that secure funding and those that do not, despite having a more significant impact on communities. There is also a gap in terms of who receives recognition and who does not. Additionally, there are intersectional aspects to this, where factors such as class, location, education, and cultural capital overlap.



# Conclusion

Community development, despite its lofty aims, shows some paternalistic parallels with colonial approaches, particularly in the reliance on specific local actors who embody governmentality. However, their lack of requisite cultural capital and cross-cultural dexterity hinders their ability to navigate all realms of the urban space. We've observed this firsthand on several occasions. On one hand, a person's ethnicity and token involvement prove insufficient for navigating the intricate spaces of the estate, leaving them uncomfortable and unable to penetrate it. Similarly, we've witnessed moments when a former gang member, once known for bravado and boldness, almost experienced a panic attack when asked to speak before statutory stakeholders about their experiences.

There is currently an emphasis on systems-based approaches to address highly complex issues, yet these approaches are insufficient. Through Centric and Cen Alliance, there will be a concerted effort for greater collaboration within the sector to understand that there's no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to comprehending black communities. There are a multitude of nuances that require deciphering, especially when metrics are used to assess and 'monitor' the effectiveness of organisations operating within these conurbations.

Metrics must be monitored with consideration that they'll require continuous amendment. Those relevant in the initial phases of a project may need to be replaced with new measurements that more closely align with the project's evolving activities. Hence, as Brooks (2012: 83) suggests, 'as an organisation matures, its goals and objectives change. The metrics must change as a function of that evolution.'

It's vital for communities to comprehend their own data and be capable of owning and interpreting it, as systems often struggle in this aspect. It shouldn't be assumed that token black middle-class leadership will automatically know how to analyse data from the black urban locale, which has its own distinct nomenclature, context, and dynamics. Equity for the communities from whom such data is collected is essential for empowering communities through data. People's real experiences also need to be considered as a key metric. Importantly, perhaps just ask what people would like to be measured rather than making the decision for them and imposing metrics.

Without understanding the criteria or emerging trends, a mismatched strategy can easily develop. By establishing the right criteria for metrics, equity can be fostered, thereby reinforcing place-based change. If maximising impact is the goal, all these factors need to be considered carefully.



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