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*CORRESPONDENCE

Agnes Aljas,
✉ agnes.aljas@erm.ee

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The MOI impact framework: a catalyst for systemic change in museums

Pirjo Hamari¹, Pille Runnel², Petri Uusikylä³ and Agnes Aljas^{2*}

¹Museum Development, Finnish Heritage Agency, Helsinki, Finland, ²Research and Development Department, Estonian National Museum, Tartu, Estonia, ³School of Management, University of Vaasa, Vaasa, Finland

This article examines a practice-based approach to museum development in the context of the growing necessity for systemic change in contemporary museum practice, adding to current debates in museum and cultural management studies on organisational change and impact. As museums operate in increasingly complex environments, they are expected not only to manage internal processes but also to demonstrate social impact and public value. From this perspective, the article outlines three interrelated approaches to museum development: managerial, audience-centred, and systemic. These are positioned as a conceptual framework through which the article presents the “Museums of Impact” (MOI) framework (MOI Framework). As opposed to traditional evaluation models focused on external assessment and performance measurement, the MOI framework is designed as an internally driven, developmental tool that supports organisational learning and change. Building on an abductive, co-creative process involving museum professionals across Europe into building a tool and a secondary research phase, the MOI framework is introduced as an approach to organisational self-evaluation that supports reflective dialogue and impact-oriented development. Drawing on developmental evaluation and systems thinking, the framework merges strategic, participatory, and structural dimensions of change. The article discusses the framework as a tool for organisational learning and internal development, and considers its relevance for supporting systemic approaches to change within the museum sector.

KEYWORDS

museum management, organisational learning, self-evaluation, societal impact, systems thinking

Introduction

Museums and other cultural organisations operate within an increasingly uncertain and volatile environment. As societal expectations evolve, these institutions are required to assume new roles. Addressing these demands requires the ability to reflect, analyse, and, when necessary, transform strategies and processes, and to provide services. These transformations require knowledge, will, and tools to understand and support change. One of the organisation’s key skills is change management, which balances internal processes with external pressures and sustains transformations in structures and practices.

Contemporary paradigms in museum development and operational management include evaluating quality and outputs, developing individual processes, and emphasising impact assessment and advocacy. These challenges are transversal across

museum activities; therefore, approaches to managing change must be comprehensive and address the organisation as a whole.

In museum development, the challenge lies in identifying appropriate holistic development strategies for museum contexts. Existing approaches remain fragmented, often focusing on external assessment, output measurement, or monitoring isolated processes, rather than supporting learning and organisation-wide change. This gap, as identified in the context of an European-wide “Museums of Impact” framework project for museum development, highlights the need for a sector-specific framework that integrates impact objectives with real-life development strategies in particular museums. Here, impact refers not only to outputs but also to the broader cultural, educational, and social effects of museums, including their contribution to public value.

This article presents the MOI framework as an outcome of a practice-based and co-creative research process that can help manage the necessary change in museum organisations. The MOI framework is a self-evaluation tool for museum development, designed collaboratively by European museum professionals, researchers, and museum organisations specifically for the museum sector. It aims to address the need for new management and development models better suited to the sector and that adopt an impact-centred approach. The framework may support museums in thinking about and effecting internal change, as well as in strategically identifying their impact pathways through self-evaluation. Using the framework as a case study, the paper then builds on the practical results to set the findings in a wider research-based context of change management. It also draws on systems thinking as a theoretical lens, emphasising that museums are dynamic and interconnected rather than linear and mechanistic organisations. This systemic perspective shifts the focus from output measurement to understanding how museums can operate to drive long-term societal change.

Building on the practical experiences from the project and its follow-up analysis, this article argues that self-developmental evaluation provides a distinct approach to museum development by embedding evaluation within organisational learning processes rather than treating it as an external assessment. From this perspective the article outlines three complementary approaches to museum development (managerial, audience-centred, and systems approaches) born from the author’s practical experiences and long-term engagement with the sector, and then discusses how the MOI framework operates across these in an impact-oriented manner. In doing so, it contributes to museum and cultural management studies by conceptualising these organisational logics and demonstrating how they can be integrated within a single development-oriented framework.

In practical terms, the MOI framework provides museums with a structured yet adaptable tool for internal reflection, allowing them to identify development priorities, articulate impact pathways, and align organisational practices with broader societal roles, complementing existing methods that focus largely on evaluating the quality of processes or outputs. This article situates the framework within ongoing debates on museum evaluation, organisational change, and impact, and examines the application of developmental evaluation (Patton, 2011) in practice.

However, we also want to take the analysis a step forward. This transformation of a sector might draw on systems thinking as a

theoretical approach (see Jung and Love, 2017, in the museum context). We conclude by considering how the MOI framework can be interpreted as a tool for systemic change and the extent to which it addresses the dynamics of organisational transformation. It reflects on how far the framework captures the complexity of systemic change processes in museums and where its limits may lie. By engaging with systems thinking and applying development-oriented evaluation practices, we suggest that museums can better respond to the demands of a changing society and strengthen their capacity to generate long-term impact.

Materials and methods

The Museums of Impact (MOI) project (2019–2022)¹ was initiated by a practical need within the European museum sector: the lack of suitable frameworks for addressing societal impact in complex organisational environments, thereby facilitating organisational self-evaluation and learning. Although not initiated as an academic research project, the development of the framework was grounded in clear theoretical considerations, further discussed in Chapter 4, and leveraged an abductive and iterative research design, characterised by continuous movement between empirical observations, practical development processes, and theoretical interpretation (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012; Hulst and Visser, 2025). In line with recent qualitative public administration research, abductive analysis in this process involved iterative conceptual refinement through engagement with practical framework development, including project documentation throughout the ongoing work, practitioner discussions, and relevant museum and management literature. The conceptual framework was therefore neither fully predefined nor derived solely from empirical observations, but evolved progressively throughout the process. In line with recent qualitative public administration scholarship, the abductive process involved the integration of multiple forms of knowledge, including institutional experience, practitioner perspectives, theoretical interpretation, and practical work (Hulst and Visser, 2025).

The approach combines action research, co-creation, and design-based research to support the process of developing a usable, context-sensitive framework in collaboration with practitioners. Action research provided a structure for iterative cycles of intervention and reflection; co-creation enabled the integration of practitioner knowledge; design-based research supported the development and refinement of a methodological tool.

The project brought together partners from multiple European countries, enabling engagement with a range of national contexts and sectoral evaluation cultures. During the proposal and early development phases, existing frameworks and approaches to impact and evaluation were identified and analysed through desk research. This included internationally recognised models as well as country-

¹ MOI! Museums of Impact project was funded by the European Commission from the Creative Europe programme under the grant agreement no. 607535-CREA-1–2019-1-FI-CULT-COOP2.

and region-specific practices, such as accreditation schemes and various evaluation and assessment tools. The mapping of existing European museum accreditation schemes and evaluation models included, in particular, national frameworks from Finland, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Iceland, Estonia, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Austria, as the project's immediate target countries. Attention was given to differences between contexts with well-established formal accreditation and evaluation systems and those with less developed or inconsistently applied frameworks. These frameworks and models generally structure evaluation around governance, collections management, audience engagement, resources, and organisational performance, and are often linked to accreditation, funding, or quality assurance. Approaches and models in use are oriented towards formal assessment and benchmarking rather than impact-oriented development. The diversity of these national and region-specific approaches highlighted the need for a more integrative, flexible, and adaptable model—a need for a new Europe-wide evaluation framework capable of operating across diverse institutional and cultural contexts, addressing evolving societal-impact needs, and supporting organisational learning in a dynamic way. The key here was also the participation of national and museum organisations in the project, so as to ensure close dialogue with actual stakeholders.

The MOI framework development shifted between theoretical perspectives (public value, developmental evaluation, and societal impact) and drew on empirical observations from museum practice and practical framework testing by consortium partners. This study draws on process-generated data collected throughout the project. This includes desk research to identify existing evaluation frameworks, as well as pilot testing data from six European museums in participating countries. The data includes project documentation and reports from various development phases, along with observational insights from participation in development and implementation. Abductive logic was applied through practice-based action research, generating knowledge via cycles of intervention, co-creation, observation, and model refinement. Participatory workshops and stakeholder forums were conducted, recorded and analysed, resulting in internal reports for further use. The draft model was piloted in six museums across different countries. Facilitated self-evaluation sessions provided empirical insights and user feedback, followed by structured feedback, also recorded and analysed. These experiences informed the finalisation of the framework.

The analysis was consistent with the abductive research design, where focus shifts between empirical data and theoretical perspectives. Data from workshops, pilot implementations, and project documentation were analysed through ongoing comparison. The focus was on noticing patterns in how museums conceptualised impact and structured development processes, and how they engaged with the MOI framework at different stages of its development. Insights gained were integrated into the next cycles of framework refinement. In this way, analysis and development remained closely intertwined.

The second research phase was started after the project and the finalising of the MOI Impact Framework, and leverages the results, experiences, and further insights gained in the first phase. It contextualises the results in a more theoretical framework and proposes further insights into museums

management and impact. This paper shares parts of that second phase research results.

The authors of this study hold hybrid positions. All four authors were actively involved in the MOI project in different roles: initiators, participants, consultants, and analysts. All four authors work at the intersection of academic research and museum practice. Their experience includes over 20 years in museum management and museum innovation, where R&D results are transferred into museum development and *vice versa*. This enables the integration of theoretical knowledge and situated expertise, as well as a critical, reflexive approach to knowledge production.

Approaches to museum development and related key concepts

Modern museums function as public spaces serving society and are influenced by social, political, cultural, economic, and technological transformations. Major debates centre on traditional versus new roles, entertainment versus education, access versus conservation, profit versus non-profit, different socially active roles versus the search for neutrality and expertise versus participation. Already in 1992, Hooper-Greenhill expressed that museum managers operate in a mist of poorly articulated expectations, and the paradoxical demands and dualities in museum purposes have just grown (Janes, 2004; Hatton, 2012; Ilie, 2022; Ruggieri and Lippolis, 2023).

The political, social, and cultural pressures to change, adapt, and modernise following the rise of the new public management discourse, bringing learnings from the business sector into cultural organisations, have increased. Although useful to some extent, Kovach (1989) already warned of the dangers of applying private business-sector dimensions to the management of public organisations, and Reussner (2003) noted that this may cause museums to lose their visitor orientation. The way museums focus on measuring effectiveness and the use of tools such as business models, KPIs, or SWOTs and how they define the museum's value proposition and relate to how organisations coordinate internal activities to create value for external parties such as owners, partners, and visitors, is still under discussion (Hallgrímsdóttir and Kristmundsson, 2021; Taormina and Bonini Baraldi, 2022).

Critical voices emphasise that a more thorough approach to organisational development could be more effective and impactful. As Korn (2017) states, museums should be operated as networked organisations, referring to the interconnection and interdependence of departments, staff, and roles, as this is critical to creating an effective approach that benefits the museum and the community. Similarly, Jung emphasises the need to change practice through new management models to be more relevant, diverse, and inclusive (Jung, 2022).

These perspectives add to a framework for managing and developing museum organisations throughout various periods and contexts. The approaches can be categorised into three primary families: the managerial approach, the audience-centric approach, and the systems approach. A summary of these approaches is provided in Table 1.

In this study, these three approaches have not been derived from theoretical traditions but instead also represent recurring

TABLE 1 The table presents three complementary approaches to managing and developing museums. It outlines practices associated with each approach, showing how they offer complementary entry points for organisational transformation. The comparison dimensions were identified based on their analytical relevance for distinguishing organisational logics and their usefulness to the MOI framework. This helps position the MOI framework as a tool that can accommodate these perspectives. Identifying these overlapping organisational logics helps to explain how the MOI framework can be applied in practice: rather than imposing a single model, it works across existing ways of operating, making underlying assumptions of each approach visible.

Transversal elements	Managerial approach	Audience-centric approach	Systems approach
Understanding of the operational environment	Predictable and stable	Changing and volatile	Dynamic, complex, uncertain
Strategic focus	Museum-driven (supply), short-term operational plans based on the organisation's planning models	Customer-driven (demand)- driven mid-term operational plans created through co-creation	Stakeholder-driven (network); long-term operational plans based on public value and wide collaboration
Culture and core values	Hierarchical, professional expertise as a core value, output-oriented	Adaptive, public engagement as a core value, outcome-oriented	Self-organising; collaboration as a core value, impact-oriented
Process development	Action-oriented, e.g., quality of processes, use of standards, efficiency	Involvement of audiences in the processes, service-provision based on user needs	Collective intelligence, platform-thinking, heritage communities as key decision-makers
Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL)	Performance-centric, quantified accreditation, and single-loop learning	Feedback as a development mechanism, accountability and double-loop learning	Continuous development loop, self-organisation and assessment; triple-loop learning

operational logics observed in practice, which are only partially addressed in the existing literature. Their identification by the authors was based on a synthesis of scholarly literature, practitioner insights, and empirical observations from the MOI project, identifying the domains that participating museum professionals addressed when identifying development needs. The approaches are constructed as analytical ideal types that represent dominant, yet simplified, logics of museum development. In practice, these approaches are context-dependent and may coexist. The following descriptions are not an assessment of the value or effectiveness of the approaches, but a way to make their modalities visible. This, in turn, will help explain the benefits of each approach and illustrate how the framework functions across its various elements.

In literature and research, the managerial approach to museum development has not been comprehensively and analytically reviewed. Often, the analysis prioritises practical examples and specific analyses of the contemporary purpose and relevance of museum management principles (Ruggieri and Lippolis, 2023; Bayrak Uluğ and Köse, 2023). Such managerial theories in museums draw from wider economic and business studies, and in the best cases, they are contextualised to museums' particular needs, objectives, and values. More often, however, they have been implemented in museum administration without full contextualisation. These models primarily intend to improve productivity, efficiency, and linear thinking (see Janes and Sandell, 2007).

Brenton and Bouckaert (2020) argue that museums have encountered a practical scenario where they are confronted with two distinct and conflicting operational logics. Two types of logic commonly discussed in the academic literature are the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences. The first statement discusses the incorporation of social and political aims into museums' conventional curatorial missions, as well as the expansion of access, the promotion of an ethical and inclusive

environment, the pursuit of wider policy objectives, sustainability, and innovation. The latter pertains to the operations conducted within museums, intending to enhance non-governmental revenue, undertake ambitious restoration and extension initiatives, implement digitisation and interactive approaches to engage the public and place increased emphasis on fund allocation. Traditional hierarchical management methods have proven too rigid to adjust to the continuously changing, chaotic operational environment. Instead, a new type of management (Hamel, 2008) and evaluation (Uusikylä, 2019) paradigm is in high demand.

This change towards increasingly adaptive and inclusive management practices is consistent with the wider need to reconceptualise museums' purpose beyond functional effectiveness. In conjunction with performance and accountability, museum management must also consider the wider public value associated with its operations. Public and non-profit organisations derive their value from the tasks they are entrusted with. According to Moore and Moore (2005), state arts agencies, for instance, have a public value that entails making a beneficial impact on the lives of individuals and the collective citizenry of a given state through the arts. When framed in this manner, the ultimate measure of success for museum operations can be seen as the impacts the museum generates.

The second, audience-centric approach, is one of three analytical perspectives identified through a synthesis of the literature and empirical observations. The approach is seen by Brenton and Bouckaert (2020) as a form of managing outwardly by considering engagements with stakeholders, rather than driving change internally within the organisation, which has often been the focus of other public sector efficiency reforms (see also Reussner, 2003), expressing a broader shift in organisational orientation. Museums have increasingly begun to operate around visitors, with the aim of better understanding their needs, motivations, and behaviour, and embedding this understanding into organisational development. In the museological literature, the

change is linked to the decline in public funding (Hooper-Greenhill, 2005), but it similarly reflects a wider reorientation of museums towards publics, service users, and participants. From a cultural policy perspective, this can be understood as a reconfiguration of how museums relate to publics, not simply as users of services but as socially constructed and engaged constituencies (Bennett, 1995).

Within this approach, audiences are conceptualised as active agents in knowledge production, with community involvement and participation becoming central to organisational practice. This orientation fosters ownership, inclusivity, and diversity across collections, exhibitions, and programmes. At the same time, the increasing competition for leisure time and the abundance of cultural offerings have reinforced a service-oriented logic, prompting museums to develop more specific and responsive experiences (Falk et al., 2006), sometimes camouflaging as an audience-centric organisation. Alongside this, wider societal transformations have contributed to the democratisation of museums (Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2014), understood as a change towards more open, participatory, and dialogical institutional roles that position museums as active spaces for civic engagement through cultural practices.

Consequently, the audience-centric approach integrates elements of public service (orientation towards publics and public value), service economy (responsiveness to users and customers), and participatory practice through co-creation and engagement. Rather than maintaining a singular focus on visitors, this approach pluralises relationships between museums and society, where people engage with museums in multiple and overlapping roles as users, participants, and audiences. This latter consideration includes a systemic perspective. The work of museums emerges from wider societal activity, in contrast to the linear planning paradigm.

The systems approach to museum development is distinct from the two preceding approaches, emphasising a holistic perspective over a traditional cause-and-effect logic. Unlike managerial and audience-oriented approaches, which focus on linear processes, the systems approach recognises that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It views the working environment as dynamic, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, with phenomena that are significantly interrelated. Consequently, museum strategy development becomes an adaptive process that responds to system dynamics instead of following a linear path. In this model, effectiveness emerges from ongoing exchanges and iterations, acknowledging that each stage of change is not fully controllable.

The systems view in museum development links to wider trends in public-sector governance and systems thinking. Museums and other service organisations cannot operate in isolation. As Jung and Love state in the pioneering work *Systems Thinking in Museums: “Museums that are systems intelligent are learning museums. Learning museums and their professionals understand that, to attend to many relationships and apply their perspectives in practice, the hierarchical, highly controlled management and governing structure should be revised to be based on collective leadership, a network of relationships, and multidirectional communication systems (Jung and Love, 2017).”*

This perspective is closely related to the different levels of learning in organisations. Argyris and Schön (1978) expanded on these principles and applied them to organisational learning.

According to their model, single-loop learning is a sequence of actions that focuses on learning from mistakes and fixing errors. The driving question in this case is, “Are things being done correctly?” In double-loop learning, a solution to visible problems is sought by researching and adjusting the elements that determine activities (root causes) and then changing the activities and operations. In double-loop learning, the question that determines action is: “Are the right things being done?” Later, a new level of transformative learning, known as three-loop learning, was included in the learning models (Argyris and Schön, 1996). The third level, which represents meta-learning, might ask, for example, “How do we know we’re doing the right things?”

Table 1 compares the three interrelated management approaches that form the basis of the MOI framework: the managerial approach, the audience-centric approach, and the systems approach. The transversal elements include strategic priority, operational environment, operational culture, core values, functions/processes in the domain, and monitoring, evaluation, and learning. The transversal elements were not derived from a sole theoretical model but emerged from the analysis by the authors of how museums structure their organisational practices in different contexts, based on their personal experience in museum management. They reflect recurring areas in which decisions are made, and development is organised in practice, and they also correspond to established perspectives in organisational theory, public management, and evaluation studies. The dimensions enable the comparison of different organisational logics without reducing them to a single conceptual framework.

These three approaches are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Every museum’s management needs to consider managerial, audience/user, and public demands, and to apply the approaches in their appropriate contexts. The comparison aims to highlight the distinctive characteristics of each approach and emphasise the specific development perspective each may individually require.

Looking across the transversal elements, the change in the external operating environment is indifferent to the management perspective chosen by the museum. In this comparison, the operating environment can be assessed on the one hand by the kind of perception of the operating environment that the chosen approach most typically represents (a descriptive point of view). On the other hand, it is also possible to consider what kind of operating environment each of the selected management approaches is best suited to.

In the managerial approach, the change factors in the operating environment are addressed through planning and forecasting. In this case, the perspective changes in a sequential and structured manner. This is typically corrected, for example, by preparing alternative scenarios. In a stable and predictable environment, this may well be possible. The audience-centric approach strongly emphasises the importance of visitors’ views. This makes the operating environment more uncertain and volatile. Managing and developing the museum requires agility and an adaptive operational logic. A complex and turbulent operating environment may call for a systemic perspective for the management and development of museums. The change factors in the operating environment are strongly interdependent, and their

effects cascade. This makes long-term planning difficult and emphasises collective intelligence.

In terms of strategic focus, the approaches differ. The managerial approach addresses the museum's strategic planning and budgeting. Its focus is supply-oriented and centres on the exact matching of goals and resources. The audience-centric approach prioritises visitor needs and is therefore highly demand-driven. The temporal perspective is typically medium to long-term because the co-creation process requires the simultaneous consideration of several factors. The systemic approach foregrounds long-term societal impacts and the importance of the public value perspective.

Operational cultures and guiding values set the three approaches apart. The managerial approach is hierarchical, results-oriented, and values expert judgment. The audience-centric approach emphasises the public service provider's perspective and relies on flexible, adaptive operations. It measures outcomes based on customer impact. The systemic approach focuses on organic development and self-organising dynamics, prioritising long-term effects. Its principles include fostering multi-stakeholder cooperation.

The development of museums' processes does not take place in a closed system. A comparison of the three approaches in the process development reveals their different operating methods. While the managerial development approach is characterised by an action orientation (e.g., quality standards), the audience-centric approach foregrounds audience involvement in processes and service provision based on user needs. The system approach evolves by embracing collective intelligence, platform thinking, and heritage communities as key decision-makers.

Finally, a systematic MEL (Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning) framework should support the development of museum operations. The three approaches compared in [Table 1](#) typically base their MEL thinking on very different premises. The managerial model emphasises strong monitoring and evaluation of performance goals. It is often quantitative and aims to produce exact indicator data as a basis for comparison of operations or accreditations. In this case, learning is single-loop and answers the question: "Does the museum do things correctly?" The second model (audience-centric), on the other hand, emphasises the importance of feedback and broader accountability. Both single-loop and double-loop are strongly present in learning. In the latter, the museum strives, through customer and owner feedback, to ensure that it not only does the right things but also does them right. In the systemic approach, meta-skills and continuous reflection are emphasised in learning to ensure that the understanding of the situation and the sense-making processes of the operation are sufficiently transparent (cf. triple-loop learning).

The need for a transversal development model and focus on impact—from theory to practice

In the preceding section, we demonstrated how managing museum processes, structures, and personnel has evolved into managing complex networks. At the same time, museums must be able to demonstrate the social impact of their activities and

the public value they add. Museums struggle to manage all these expectations while remaining true to their core values and functions of researching, collecting, conserving, interpreting, and exhibiting tangible and intangible heritage (ICOM museum definition from 2022). What might benefit such organisations is a comprehensive, transversal framework that systematically helps understand the links between organisational development and increased impact. Existing evaluation frameworks and related studies are primarily results- or quality-oriented, i.e., evaluating the quality of outputs or aiming to measure impact, such as The arts programmes evaluation framework ([Matarasso, 1996](#)) or the Arts Council Impact and Insight Toolkit (Arts Council). These valuable and still emerging frameworks for measuring impact offer the means of leveraging post-delivery evaluation for learning organisations. The value proposition of the MOI framework differs from these in its focus on internal development instead of measuring results. The MOI framework brings together three interconnected concepts for building this framework: impact, public value, and developmental evaluation. In this section, we explore these concepts more closely and look at how they connect to management approaches in general and to the MOI framework in particular.

In sectoral theory discussion, the focus on museums' societal impact² has gained considerable attention (see, e.g., [Simon, 2016](#); [Falk, 2021](#); [McCall and Gray, 2014](#)). This emphasis on impact signals a significant paradigm shift in museum development, as museums now need to persuade governments and funding agencies of their relevance to the community and the value they offer the public. Within the cultural sector, including museums, there is a challenge in perceiving impact as a multi-dimensional concept encompassing innovation, social, economic, and operational contexts, ultimately adding to systemic transformation. The management approach confines the assessment of museum activities to outputs, prioritising performance and goal achievement. While outputs and outcomes are related to the provider of the activity or service, impacts are associated with users ([Kolodinsky et al., 2006](#)) and other stakeholders. [Clark et al. \(2004\)](#), 7 define impact as the part of the total outcome that happened as a result of the activity of an organisation, above and beyond what would have happened anyway.

When museums articulate their intent to make an impact on society, it often refers to the educational, economic, and social dimensions in addition to the cultural work they are performing. Here, societal impact is understood as measurable outcomes arising from the existence of a resource that demonstrate a change in the lives or life opportunities of the community ([Tanner, 2012](#)). The societal impact of museums could be understood as the effect of their activities on the social fabric of the community and the wellbeing of the individuals and families who live there ([Phillips and Wong, 2016](#)). [Maas \(2009\)](#) stresses the difficulty of measuring

² The methodology of transforming inputs into actions, outputs, outcomes, and impacts is commonly known as the Logic Model, Results Chain, IOOI, or Theory of Change. To gain a thorough understanding of the programme theory behind these models, see [Funnell and Rogers \(2011\)](#).

the social impact of organisations because of their complex, evolving, and interpretive nature.

The prevailing belief is that museums not only contain intrinsic value but also greatly contribute to people's lives. This recognition stresses the importance of museums framing their cultural value in ways that resonate with their communities (Nelson et al., 2022; Carvill Schellenbacher, 2017). Such framing supports museums' relevance by addressing urgent cultural, social, and environmental issues, including resilience, sustainability, social justice, and fundamental rights.

Museums' alignment towards providing public value refers to the creation and delivery of benefits, services, or goods that contribute positively to the wellbeing and interests of the public or a community³. Museums operate in three key fields—cultural, economic, and political—and fulfil three key institutional roles: serving as a cultural, public, and economic institution (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel, 2014). In many cases, the interpretation of those roles depends on the museums and their public (ibid). Museums acknowledge that these roles can be conflicting, and they are balanced through negotiation in daily operations and organisational decisions. As a cultural institution, these roles include mediating and interpreting heritage for the public, as well as preserving and collecting it. As public institutions, museums are socialising and democratising agents, sharing their role with educational institutions, while also facilitating public cultural participation and contributing to people's wellbeing. The third role concerns museums as economic agents, competing in the open market for consumers' attention (and money).

The key to successfully operating on all three wider and interconnected cultural, political/social, and economic fields is whether a museum creates public value for the community as an active social actor. The concept of public value refers to the benefits or services a museum creates beyond the immediate value to its visitors, who directly engage with its collections, exhibitions, and programs. The precondition of this is going beyond the traditional role of heritage institutions. This can include providing educational opportunities through community engagement, increasing knowledge, providing a shared space for engaging with cultural heritage, and supporting social wellness by fostering appreciation for arts, culture, and history. Museums' public value can emerge from their environmental activities and sustainable practices, such as participation in green energy and waste-reduction initiatives. Public value involves economic aspects, such as supporting the local tourism sector or partnering with the creative industries.

The third fundamental concept of the framework is developmental evaluation. Developmental evaluation (DE) is an evaluation approach that can help social innovators develop social change initiatives in complex or uncertain environments. According to Patton (2011), 1, DE supports innovation development

to guide adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments. Innovations can take the form of new projects, programs, products, organisational changes, policy reforms, and system interventions. A complex system is characterised by a large number of interacting, interdependent elements with no central control. The DE approach emphasises the role of service design or development because it provides real-time, or near real-time, feedback to management, enabling a continuous development loop. Evaluation is used to determine areas of activity that may require development to improve your organisation's performance. DE incorporates the concept of ongoing improvement and, in contrast to positivist evaluation theory, does not prioritise complete statistical objectivity and the independent role of evaluation.

The MOI framework is based on an in-depth understanding of the interrelated nature of museum operations. The framework illustrates the contribution of museum operations to public value, including social, cultural, environmental, and well-being-related impacts. It bases its approach on understanding impact value chains and helps assess their effectiveness using DE as a tool.

The MOI framework brings these three interconnected concepts—impact, the public value of museums, and DE—into a single framework. These concepts help address the need for museums to understand how their activities affect contemporary society and how they can contribute to societal processes through the different roles they play (Aljas and Hamari, 2025). Bringing together the different aspects of DE, systems thinking, and the need for new impact-and audience-oriented development tools in cultural organisations, primarily focusing on museums.

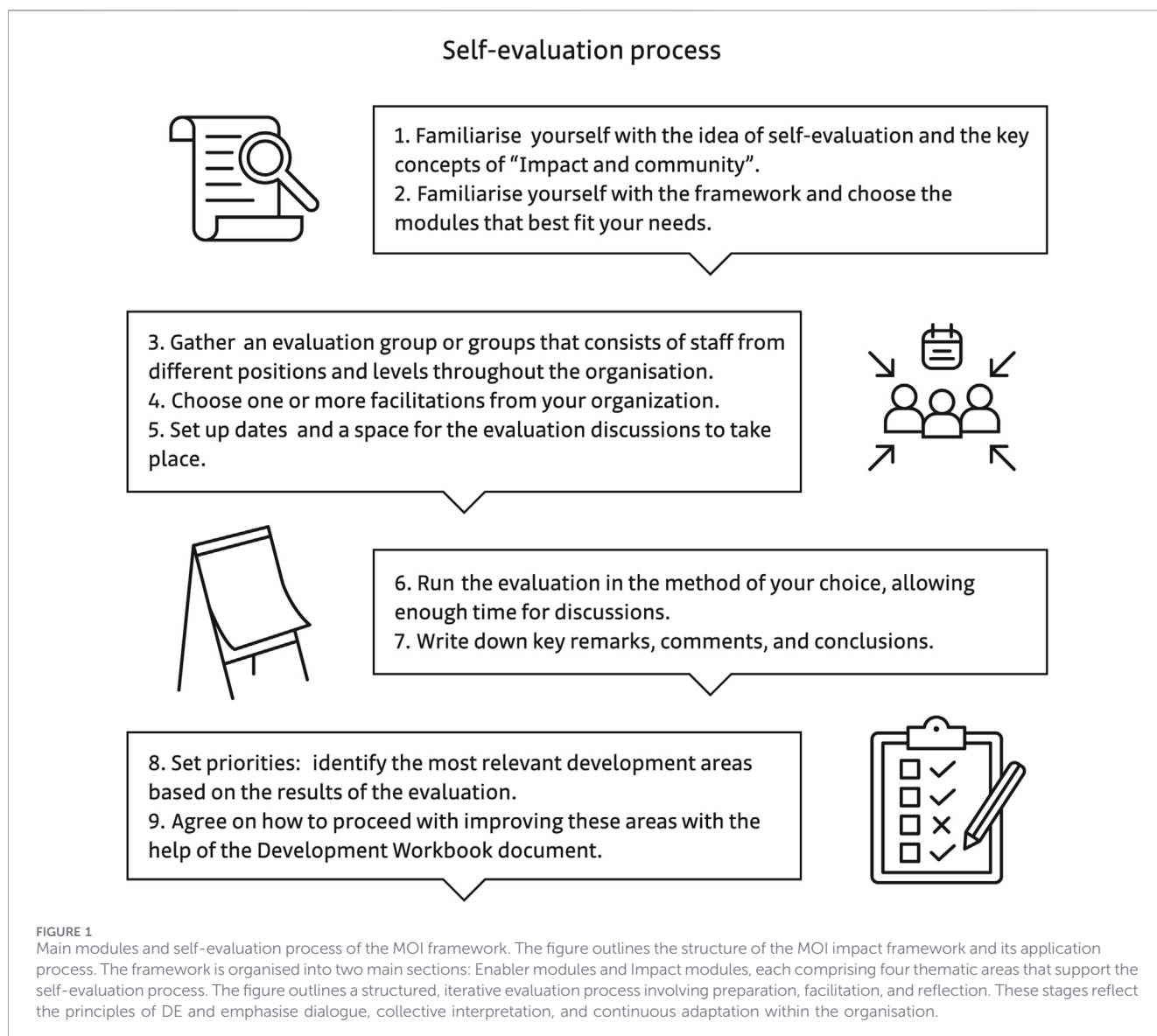
The concepts of impact, public value, and developmental evaluation operate at different analytical levels from the approaches to museum development discussed in the previous subchapter. While the managerial, audience-centred, and systems approaches describe distinct organisational logics through which museums structure their management activities, the concepts of impact, public value, and developmental evaluation provide the normative and methodological foundations for guiding and interpreting organisational development. Within the MOI framework, these two layers are brought into relation: the framework works through different organisational logics while grounding development processes in impact-oriented, value-driven, and learning-based evaluation practices.

The following section draws on the empirical and practice-based development of the framework. We discuss all the parts of the MOI framework as well as the basic ideas of the evaluation process. In addition, we analyse the framework's principles to assess its societal impact and its limitations and inadequacies.

The MOI impact framework as a tool for change

In the following, we present the MOI impact framework as an outcome of a co-creative, practice-based research process, developed to support museums of various types, sizes, and contexts, and show how it is grounded in empirical practice while also shaped through conceptual development. We outline its structure, content, and use process, culminating in a real-life

³ Related to the concept of public value is the concept of relevance. Museum's relevance in society is linked to their ability to reflect and interact with communities and audiences and to find a place in everyday life. Relevance can be defined as both a cognitive process that takes place in the mind of an individual, or as a social, participatory engagement between people, museums and communities.

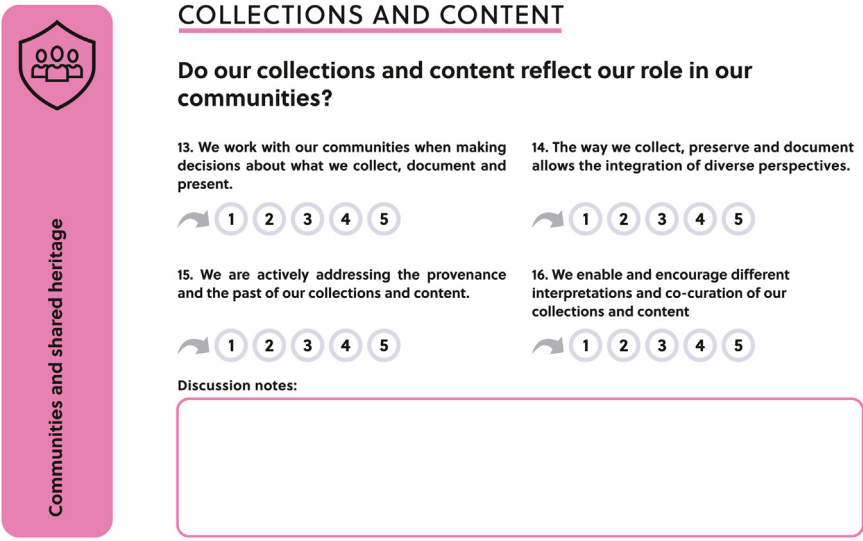


use case. The framework was developed through several participatory co-development workshops conducted in cooperation with European museum agencies, associations, museums and developer communities, engaging over 1000 museum professionals in the process. These workshops enabled the identification and interpretation of key factors related to organisational development and the interface between museums and society, which were transformed into the self-developmental evaluation framework. The development process followed an abductive, iterative logic, combining practitioner knowledge and discussions across six locations with analytical reflection to produce reports. The preliminary versions of the framework were again tested, piloted, and refined in museums across Europe, selected on a complementary basis to ensure they represent varying sizes, goals, and operational contexts. It was later consolidated into three usable formats, accompanied by the guidelines for use, which are available from the NEMO (Network of European Museum Organisations) website (see also [Aljas and Hamari, 2025](#)).

Purpose, process, and structure

The purpose of the MOI evaluation process is designed to facilitate structured internal dialogue in the organisation. The purpose of this dialogue is to actively discuss and valorise different aspects of the museum's operations and to document the results so that they can be used in the later phases of the development.

The framework supports this process by providing a structured discussion framework in the form of evaluative statements, grounded in the concepts and methodology of DE. The evaluation process uses three stages: preparation, facilitation, and reflection. Rather than producing fixed assessments, the process focuses on developing a common understanding between participants and detecting areas that may be prioritised for further development. Its value lies in the discussions it generates, the recognition of development needs, and the potential to inform subsequent organisational change processes.



Communities and shared heritage

COLLECTIONS AND CONTENT

Do our collections and content reflect our role in our communities?

13. We work with our communities when making decisions about what we collect, document and present.

14. The way we collect, preserve and document allows the integration of diverse perspectives.

15. We are actively addressing the provenance and the past of our collections and content.

16. We enable and encourage different interpretations and co-curation of our collections and content

Discussion notes:

FIGURE 2
Example of evaluation statements in the Impact module “Communities and shared heritage”, under the subtopic of “Collections and content”. The figure illustrates how the framework operationalises impact-related reflection through a structured set of evaluative statements. The example is drawn from the MOI Framework Workbook (PDF format), where both scores and qualitative reflections can be recorded.

The MOI framework is organised into two sections comprising a total of eight modules: Enabler modules and Impact modules (Figure 1). Each module is further divided into subtopics, each containing multiple evaluative statements. In total, the framework includes 151 impact statements for evaluation. Together, these statements constitute the analytical basis of the evaluation process.

Enabler modules centre on internal organisational dimensions, discussing how the organisation operates and creates the conditions for impact. The Enabler module includes questions:

- What we do – Impact goals and strategy
- How we work – Organisational culture and competences
- How our organisation functions – Resources and service development
- How we embed digital into services and processes – Digital engagement

The Impact modules address areas identified as central to understanding the broader societal role of museums, including:

- Communities and shared heritage
- Relevant and reliable knowledge
- Societal relevance
- Sustainable organisations and societies

In the evaluation process, each statement is assessed on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates a mutual understanding that the topic is not currently perceived as insufficiently addressed, and 5 indicates it is well established and supported by evidence. This scoring process is meant to support the identification of both strengths and areas for further development, specifically regarding the museum’s impact.

As an illustrative example, the evaluation process can be reviewed through one of the Impact module workbooks. In the

module “Communities and shared heritage”, a subtopic titled “Collections and content” (Figure 2) includes four evaluative statements dealing with various aspects of collection-related practices. These statements reflect areas identified by professionals participating in seminars and pilots as the most relevant in considering impact in museum work. During the evaluation process, the participants are invited to discuss, document, and evaluate these statements in relation to their organisational context. The discussion and the assessment contribute to the development of a shared insight and support the identification of areas that may be considered strengths or priorities for further development. These identified areas can then inform subsequent, more structured development processes.

The modular structure was designed to make the evaluation process more manageable. In practice, this allows the organisation to engage with individual modules, subtopics, or selected statements, rather than tackling the entire framework in a single session, as the required in-depth discussions can be intensive and time-consuming. There is no single prescribed way to use the framework; rather, it is intended to be adapted to the particular needs and contexts of different organisations.

Once the evaluation process is complete, an organisation can identify development objectives and formulate a development plan based on the outcomes. At this stage, it is recommended to advance the process to the next level using the Development Workbook. It is a complementary tool created to support further development work and the next step on the path to rethink their impact areas. It outlines a simple development roadmap in five practical steps, asking the museum to identify a limited number of development goals, and describing concretely what needs to change. This is followed by outlining information gaps to fill, resources available or needed, process responsibilities and ownership, and development

timeline urgency. It provides a first-step practical plan that helps to start the development process in an implementable way.

Although the MOI framework uses evaluation as a methodological approach, it is not intended as a tool for monitoring organisational performance or measuring impact directly. Instead, it aims to support reflection and dialogue, helping identify development areas closely connected to impact, and supporting existing evaluation practices. Its value lies in making visible the relationships between internal organisational development and the wider societal roles that museums are expected to fulfil.

Use cases - applying the MOI framework in practice

We conclude this section by presenting some examples of how the MOI framework has been applied in practice. A small local museum in Estonia, operating with only two employees, used the framework to support the development of its organisational strategy. While the organisation's small size allowed for flexibility in daily operations, it also revealed the absence of longer-term, impact-oriented thinking. The framework contributed to introducing a more structured approach for articulating the museum's strategic direction.

Importantly, the process reached beyond internal reflection. The framework facilitated the involvement of the local municipality and other stakeholders, transforming the evaluation into a wider process of discussion and negotiation of roles and expectations. At one point, these discussions even reached the local newspaper, illustrating the sensitivity and complexity of aligning different stakeholder perspectives. Ultimately, the process led to the emergence of a mutual vision between the museum and its stakeholders.

This example highlights how the framework can support the transition from internal organisational reflection to stakeholder engagement. In this sense, the process embodies key principles of DE, particularly its emphasis on dialogue, iteration, and adaptation within complex environments. As one of the museum staff thought about the experience of joint strategic planning and situating the museum as a partner in responding to wider community needs:

"The MOI model enabled the museum staff, local municipality, and museum partners to jointly discuss all areas of museum work. Importantly, the founders and partners gained a thorough overview of the multiple aspects of museum operations. [...] When creating a development plan for the museum, the model helped to agree on the museum's key communities and impact goals for both the museum and its partners, and to open discussions on sustainability and access. We also identified areas where the museum can be of value to the local government. Approaching it from this platform allows us to view beyond purely economic aspects."

The case illustrates how the framework can help align organisational development with wider societal roles and expectations, particularly in situations where resources are limited but stakeholder engagement is critical.

Another example of the use of the framework has recently been published by the Finnish Music Archives. This archive leveraged both the MOI Framework as well as the Europeana Impact Playbook on their internal impact development journey, seeking to renew the organisation's strategic approach to impact and increase it:

"Working based on the MOI workbooks proved to be a highly fruitful way of working. The 151 impact statements included in the workbooks examine the activities and impact of a cultural heritage organization from a wide range of perspectives. Although the statements were originally designed for museums, most of them were also well suited to developing the impact of a small archival organization. In addition, many of the statements made it possible to examine the activities and impact of the Music Archive from new, thought-inspiring perspectives. The workbooks were not reviewed in numerical order, nor were all statements addressed if they were not relevant from the perspective of a small private archival organization. However, there were only a few such statements. ... The experiences from the impact development project have already been very positive at this stage. Both the MOI method and the Impact Playbook have proven useful also from the perspective of a small archival organization. They have helped to structure the activities of the Music Archive and its impact and have brought into discussion many perspectives that might otherwise have gone unnoticed." (Henriksson et al., 2026, translated by PH).

This example, in addition to confirming the usability of the framework, indicates that it is sufficiently flexible to be used in cultural and heritage organisations also outside the museum sector.

Conclusion

This paper introduced a new approach to managing change and increasing impact in museums, developed in response to the demands of an increasingly complex operating environment. It starts from the premise that while change management is essential in museum organisations, it is not always clear where and how to begin. The MOI impact framework can be understood as one way to respond to this challenge, providing a practical, reflective, and domain-specific tool for museum development.

The article outlined three interrelated perspectives to museum development: the managerial approach, the audience-centric approach, and the systems approach. These perspectives do not constitute fixed models but rather provide a way to understand different orientations in museum development. The MOI framework brings these perspectives into dialogue within a single frame. Furthermore, the framework draws on the principles of DE, allowing museums to reflect on their activities and ways of working to support organisational growth, clarify purpose, and strengthen focus. This represents a shift in evaluation culture from a traditional outcome-focused approach to one that supports learning and purposeful development. The framework was developed through in-depth collaboration and dialogue with the museum sector, which adds to its grounding in practice and relevance to museum development contexts.

The MOI framework supports museums in thinking about their intended areas of impact and possible pathways towards them. It may be used to address strategic challenges whilst helping to understand internal change processes. Its main role is to support an internal discussion tool that facilitates the articulation of different perspectives and the development of shared understandings within organisations. It contributes to organisations' capacity to define and direct their own development processes. In doing so, it positions museums as the drivers and leaders of their own transformation. The framework integrates impact, relevance, and public value into strategic thinking and planning, opening the door to big, even transformative change.

Although the MOI framework is centred on increasing impact, its possible applications reach beyond that, especially when viewed through a systems-thinking orientation, as this paper has discussed. Grounded in DE and systems thinking, it can be applied to everyday practice and supports long-term, systemic transformation.

This article makes a dual contribution to the field by bridging the gap between theoretical organisational models and the practical realities of museum management. Academically, this article advances museum and cultural management studies by conceptualising a three-tiered developmental logic—managerial, audience-centric, and systemic—and integrating these into a single, cohesive framework grounded in developmental evaluation and systems thinking.

By shifting the scholarly focus from linear output measurement to complex learning processes, the research offers a new theoretical lens for understanding how museums can navigate volatile operating environments. For practitioners, the article provides a field-tested, adaptable self-evaluation tool that moves beyond the rigid constraints of external accreditation or generic business metrics. It empowers museum professionals to act as agents of their own transformation by facilitating structured internal dialogue and cross-departmental reflection, ultimately helping institutions align their daily operations with long-term societal impact and public value creation. In doing so, the framework offers a scalable solution for museums of all sizes to move from a “doing things right” performance mindset to a “doing the right things” impact-oriented strategic posture.

Discussion

The MOI impact framework for museums was developed in response to a growing need for sector-specific tools that help museums understand and strengthen their societal impact. In contrast to more generic management approaches, the framework reflects the museum's particular institutional roles and is presented here as a participatory, holistic approach to organisational development, grounded in internal dialogue and reflection. It provides a structured way for organisations to explore and articulate their potential for impact.

As observed in workshop discussions and pilot implementations, participating museums frequently reported pressures to demonstrate their societal relevance while facing institutional inertia and limited resources. Many institutions work to become more strategic, inclusive, and impact-driven, yet lack practical frameworks that reflect the complex realities of

museum work. The MOI impact framework was developed in response to this gap identified through these communications as an attempt to offer an adaptable, museum-focused tool that supports self-reflection and organisational learning. In facilitated self-evaluation sessions, museums were encouraged to define their impact goals by clarifying where they stand, where they aim to develop, and how to progress across impact areas. The framework developed through this process provides a structured approach to managing internal change in line with external expectations. It contributes to building organisational capacity, setting priorities, and facilitating sustainable development processes.

At the core of the framework is a shift in thinking: from operational performance to a more intentional, impact-oriented understanding of organisational development, prompting museums to reflect on how they position themselves in relation to the societies in which they operate. In this context, museums are encouraged to define their impact goals—the ‘why’ and ‘whom’—through continuous conversation with their communities, audiences, and environments. Where museums engage in such reflective processes and align their operations accordingly, this may strengthen their capacity to create impact within their communities and society more broadly. One way to illustrate this is using the concept of the impact value chain. The impact value chain, as used in tools like Europeana Impact Playbook Impact Value Chain (Verwayen et al., 2017), outlines how the impact can be created through a chain, as emerging through a sequence of stages, from goals and resources to activities, outputs, outcomes, and finally impact. While there is a growing focus on evaluating the “end” of this chain, that is, measuring impact, the MOI framework focuses on the earlier stages of the chain. It emphasises DE: assessing resources, capacities, internal processes and activities in ways that encourage learning, strategy and change. DE can support organisations in shifting from a focus on ‘doing things right’ to ‘doing the right things’. Operational thinking contributes to stronger alignment among operational practices and strategic intentions and supports the development of organisational capacity to achieve impact over time.

This distinction highlights one important difference: the MOI Impact Framework functions as an internal development tool for an organisation. This distinguishes the framework from existing evaluation and accreditation models, which are primarily designed for external assessment and performance measurement. The process of applying the framework is self-directed and driven by the organisation's own willingness and capacity for reflection and change. Rather than responding to externally imposed performance metrics, the framework emphasises organisational learning, cross-departmental reflection, and alignment of activities around a common mission. The framework identifies key thematic areas relevant to societal impact, while allowing museums to interpret and apply these in ways that reflect their strengths, challenges, and goals.

Participatory development processes are not free of challenges. They require openness, reflection, and what Preskill (2011) calls “courageous discussions”. At the same time, such approaches can, as suggested by workshop and pilot experiences, contribute to more sustained and systemic forms of organisational change, particularly when engagement extends across the organisation. The MOI framework supports this process through providing a structure for dialogue and enabling organisations to move beyond siloed

efforts towards a more coordinated, common understanding of impact.

It is important to position what the MOI framework is not. The framework should not be understood as a quality evaluation or accreditation scheme, nor as a traditional impact assessment tool for measuring the outcomes of specific activities, such as the Arts Council England's Impact and Insight toolkit (Arts Council England, 2019). Rather, it can be seen as complementing such approaches via addressing the larger organisational context in which impact is created. The framework encourages transversal discussions across the organisation and offers museums the opportunity to reflect on their performance in different thematic areas related to impact. Through its emphasis on participatory dialogue, it contributes to all aspects of museum work, from articulating its societal mission to reorienting focus when needed to embedding impact-oriented thinking into everyday practices.

The MOI framework gives a systemic starting point for museum development. As indicated earlier in the article, the systems approach should not be interpreted as a fully formed theory, but rather as an approach to interpreting the dynamics of museum development, in which attention turns from museum-centric approaches to an understanding of museums as dynamic, interdependent entities.

Understanding the complex operating environment and the often-conflicting societal expectations museums face requires a multifaceted perspective and an awareness of the interconnection and interdependence within museum operations. In recent years, systems change has increasingly been explored through conceptual tools from systems theory and complexity thinking (e.g., Boisot and McKelvey, 2011; Byrne and Callaghan, 2014). These approaches present a more detailed and in-depth way to investigate interdependencies and the structures that emerge from dynamic system behaviour, going beyond the limits of traditional administration and management-oriented thinking.

Moving from a linear, museum-centric development approach to a more systemic one is a significant undertaking. It involves rethinking strategies, operational models, and even the core assumptions that guide museum work. Researchers in the museum field, such as Villeneuve and Song (2017), highlight this paradigm shift and the need for analysis, reflective, adaptive practices, as well as, where necessary, the strategic transformation of processes and service provision. Preskill (2011) similarly argues that museums have to adopt a more intentional and strategic approach to achieving impactful outcomes through their work. However, this transformation is complex; it requires time, knowledge, leadership and the appropriate tools. While public sector organisations have become more experienced in applying generic management models and tools, there is still a lack of sector-specific development tools to support impact-oriented development in

museum contexts (Ward, 2018). The MOI framework seeks to fill that gap. Grounded in museum practice and oriented towards longer-term, systemic forms of impact, it offers institutions a way to engage with these challenges in an integrated manner.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

All authors participated in the design and interpretation of the study, MOI project, analysis of the data and wrote the manuscript. PU's contribution is mainly related to the development of a systemic perspective and the evaluation of impact. PR and AA prepared the introductions and contributed to management systems, and PH provided the case study.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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