

ATTRIBUTION AND CONTRIBUTION



CSOs often need to assess whether, or how far, their actions influenced a change or set of changes. The term *attribution* is used when this can be accurately measured. The term *contribution* is more loosely defined. It normally means a CSO helped produce a change alongside other agencies or factors. Several different approaches can be used to assess attribution or contribution to change.

CSOs are able to influence change in two distinct ways. Sometimes, they are solely responsible for producing a change or set of changes. More often, however, they are jointly responsible, along with other agencies or wider socio-economic factors. In these cases, CSOs often worry about how to report on change, leading to one of two extremes:

- either reporting any relevant change as if it was solely down to their work; or
- failing to report any change at all because they are concerned about making false claims.

There are two major reasons why CSOs need to properly assess and communicate the degree to which they have influenced change. The first is to demonstrate accountability for results. This means examining how far a change or set of changes resulted from a CSO's work in order to establish the difference it has made.

The second reason is to learn in order to improve. In this case it is important to assess not just *whether or how far* a CSO has influenced change, but also to explain *how and why*. This often means understanding the role of other agencies and/or factors in bringing about change. If a CSO fails to do this properly, there is a risk that incorrect findings may lead to incorrect decisions, such as scaling up a programme, or closing one down incorrectly (Rogers 2014).

Defining attribution and contribution

The formal definition for **attribution** is:

"the ascription of a causal link between observed (or expected to be observed) changes and a specific intervention" (OECD 2010).

However, attribution is more widely understood within the CSO community as the accurate measurement of the extent to which a change or set of changes was caused by an agency or development intervention. Attribution can be claimed when:

- an agency or intervention was the sole cause of a change or set of changes; or

- other influences were involved, but the change(s) would not have happened without the agency or intervention; or
- it is possible to calculate with some degree of accuracy the proportion of a change or set of changes that was produced through the agency or intervention.

The term **contribution**, on the other hand, is more loosely defined. It is usually understood to mean that an intervention or agency was one amongst a number of influences that helped produce a change or set of changes. Other influences could include:

- the actions of other individuals or agencies not engaged in the intervention;
- previous initiatives that helped lay the groundwork for success or failure; or
- external factors, such as changes in the wider physical, socio-economic or political environment.

CSOs might want to understand attribution or contribution to change in many different scenarios. Three of the most common are:

- Most often, CSOs want to know how an intervention, such as a project, programme or policy, contributed to a change or set of changes. The intervention may be solely managed by an individual CSO, or by multiple agencies.
- Sometimes, CSOs need to understand the contribution made by particular elements of a project or programme. For example, they might want to know how a public campaign, or lobbying of key individuals, contributed to a successful advocacy project. This means breaking down an intervention in different components, and assessing the contribution of each.
- CSOs may want to identify their own particular role in bringing about change. For example, a CSO might collaborate with other agencies in a large, successful programme, and might want to measure or assess its own unique contribution. This is often needed for accountability purposes.

If a CSO was responsible for instigating an initiative it is probably fair to say that any resulting changes would not have happened without that CSO, even if other agencies became involved later on. In other cases, a CSO might have

supported work instigated by other agencies, in which case its role might be to have enhanced the change process in order to ensure that changes were better, or were realised more quickly. And in some cases – for instance when multiple CSOs engage in joint advocacy or campaigning work – a CSO might simply have tried to increase the chances of success.

Therefore, there are many different possibilities, and many different ways in which a CSO or a development intervention can contribute to change alongside others. Assessing attribution or contribution is rarely an easy task for CSOs. This is partly because much of their work is carried out through partnerships, networks and consortia; and partly because long-term engagement in communities often builds on previous development interventions.

Contribution and complexity

It is much easier to assess contribution when changes are clear, measurable and short-term. For example, CSOs are normally able to attribute outputs (deliverables) to their interventions. They may also find it relatively easy to demonstrate how outputs contribute to immediate change. For example, nutrition programmes often result in immediate changes to children's weight; eye-saving operations can restore lost sight; and training might result in immediate, increased awareness and understanding of an issue.

As changes become further removed in time from deliverables, and more difficult to measure, it becomes harder to assess contribution. Many CSOs work in areas such as advocacy, capacity building or mobilisation of communities, where change often evolves slowly. There may be multiple interventions over long time periods, which means much more opportunity for other factors to influence change.

It is even harder to assess contribution within complex programmes, dealing with issues such as governance, democracy and climate change. Here there are usually multiple agencies involved, and interventions are often spread across years if not decades. It might be possible to show contribution to short-term changes directly related to a CSO's work. But it may be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to calculate overall contribution to longer-term change. For example, a CSO might be able to show that its awareness-raising campaign helped increase understanding of the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS. But it may be impossible to precisely measure the contribution of that awareness-raising campaign to an overall change in discourse amongst local politicians.

Likewise, in humanitarian work it is often relatively easy to assess contribution to immediate, dramatic, changes in the aftermath of a natural disaster. But it is much harder to assess contribution to longer-term change resulting from reconstruction efforts, especially when multiple donors and different agencies become involved.

Overall, therefore, the more straightforward the development initiative, and the closer changes are in time

to the initiative, the easier it is to assess contribution. This means CSOs need to be realistic about what they can reasonably claim. And it is why most CSOs tend to focus on contribution rather than attribution.

Methods for assessing attribution or contribution

A number of different methodologies can be used to assess attribution and contribution to change (see Mayne 2012; Rogers 2014; Stern et al. 2012; White and Phillips 2012). These are described below. They are not mutually exclusive, and there is often much overlap between them.

Statistical studies depend on the statistical analysis of correlations. Data is first collected on different variables across a large number of cases. Then the extent to which the variables are correlated is used to assess (or estimate) how far an intervention has contributed to change. As a very simple example, a CSO seeking to improve hygiene in a town could correlate the number of hygiene-awareness sessions attended by communities with changes in incidence of water-borne disease. If communities who attended the most sessions had the highest reduction in water-borne disease (on average) it would be possible to estimate how much of this reduction was directly related to the CSO's work. In reality, statistical studies are usually much more complicated than this, and often handle multiple variables at the same time.

Counterfactuals are the basis for experimental approaches (such as randomised control trials) and quasi-experimental approaches. They compare change in a group of individuals or organisations receiving support with change in a group not receiving support, or receiving a different kind of support – known as comparison or control groups. Contribution is assessed by calculating the difference in change between those receiving support and the control or comparison groups, and then attributing this to the support provided.

Theory-based methods rely on the development of a theory of change or impact pathway, which maps out the path between interventions and desired changes. Evidence is sought at each stage of the pathway to try and develop a plausible (believable) case that explains how changes have been produced. If a CSO can establish that change has occurred at each stage of the process, they can show how and why the desired change(s) happened, and thereby demonstrate their own role in the process. Some theory-based methods, such as process tracing, also involve the development and testing of alternative theories of change. This is done to eliminate other potential contributions to change, or to assess their relative importance.

Case-based methods rely on selecting multiple cases where change has or hasn't happened, and asking common questions across all the cases to help identify which factors or interventions were most important in producing change. In some circumstances this can help a CSO identify its own contribution to change. The best-known case-based method of this kind is Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), which is described in another M&E Universe paper.

Participatory methods are perhaps the most common methods used by CSOs outside of major evaluations or research studies. Participatory methods involve asking different stakeholders what they think contributed to a change or set of changes. This helps a CSO gain insight into the role that a development intervention played in bringing about change. Participatory methods tend to rely on qualitative methods of data collection, such as interviews, focus-group discussions and observations. They are seen by some as less rigorous than other methods of assessing contribution, and may be particularly subject to bias. For example, beneficiaries may tell a CSO what they think it wants to hear, and might over-emphasise the role of a CSO in contributing to change (White and Phillips 2012).

Obvious causality. Some changes are obviously the result of particular interventions, and no further work is needed to establish contribution. This may be because there is no obvious alternative explanation – for example, people recovering sight after an eye operation, or people completely changing their views on people living with HIV/AIDS following a targeted awareness-raising campaign. Or it may be because the science of an intervention is well-known and tested. For example, it is accepted that well-run vaccination programmes result in the lowering of certain diseases (Rogers 2014).

Each of these methods have different strengths and weaknesses, and conditions under which they do or do not apply (Stern et al. 2012). For example:

- Statistical studies and counterfactuals require a sufficient number of cases to enable statistical techniques to work properly.
- Counterfactuals are good at assessing whether an intervention has made an overall contribution to change, but do not help explain how or why.

- Theory-based methods can help explain how an intervention contributed to change, but are not always able to show the precise level of change that can be attributed to that intervention.
- Participatory methods are better able to work backwards – assessing change and then working backwards to assess how much of a contribution an intervention or set of interventions has made.
- Theory-based methods and participatory approaches are better able to assess the relative contribution of many different agencies and/or external factors.

Cartwright (2007) divides the methods into two different categories. The first (statistical studies and counterfactuals) are those that can provide a definite answer about how much change can be attributed to an intervention or agency, but can only be applied in a limited range of circumstances. The second category covers methods that can be applied in almost all circumstances, but do not enable attribution to be measured with precision.

More than one method can be applied at the same time, and it is relatively common in large evaluations to pursue multiple methods. The box below contains some common methodologies for data collection and analysis (described elsewhere in the M&E Universe), alongside the approaches used to assess contribution.

Summary

How far a CSO needs to go in assessing contribution to a change or set of changes depends on many circumstances. If a CSO is undertaking a major project or programme, where M&E findings may have widespread implications, it may need to invest significant resources in investigating

Methodology	Approaches
Randomised control trials and quasi-experimental approaches	<i>Counterfactuals:</i> Control or comparison groups are used to compare changes in groups receiving products or services through a development intervention with those not receiving them. The difference is attributed to the intervention.
Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA)	<i>Case-based:</i> Multiple cases are investigated: some in which change happened and some where it did not. Different combinations of factors that produced change are investigated.
Most significant change (MSC)	<i>Participatory:</i> Participants are asked to identify the most significant changes that have occurred in their lives to which a project or programme has contributed.
Contribution analysis and process tracing	<i>Theory-based:</i> Both methodologies rely on the development of a theory of change. Evidence of change is then sought at each level of the theory of change, thereby enabling the pathways of change to be understood.
Baselines and endlines	<i>Statistical studies, Obvious causality, Participatory:</i> Contribution might be assessed between baseline and a repeat study by performing statistical analysis to correlate inputs/outputs and changes. Alternatively, changes might be investigated through participatory methods. Sometimes it may be obvious that a set of inputs is responsible for any changes identified.
Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)	<i>Participatory:</i> Various participatory tools, including maps, calendars and timelines, are used to build up a picture of change, and to examine beneficiaries' perceptions of contribution to change.
Outcome harvesting	<i>Participatory:</i> Stories of change always include a narrative assessment of how an agency contributed to the change. Most often, this is generated through interviews with stakeholders.
Organisational assessment tools (OCATs)/rating tools	<i>Participatory:</i> Tools used to rate changes in capacity often contain supplementary questions or ratings to assess contribution.
Impact grids	<i>Participatory:</i> Multiple cases are charted on a grid or graph. One of the axes shows the extent of change seen within the cases; the other indicates the degree of contribution of an agency or intervention.

contribution through statistical studies or counterfactuals. But it is usually not necessary to go this far. There are many simple ways of assessing contribution, most of which rely on theory-based or participatory methodologies that seek the judgement of different stakeholders. One example is provided in the case study below.

A key factor is the complexity of the initiative. CSOs that operate independently, delivering services directly to communities, may find it much easier to assess their contribution to change. CSOs working through partnerships, networks or coalitions, or those working in complex areas of change such as governance, democracy

and empowerment, often find it much harder to isolate their own particular contribution to change.

For many CSOs, it is rare that their work will lead exclusively to desired changes. The task, therefore, is to produce a case (or set of cases) that shows a plausible (believable) link between their intervention(s) and any changes. This usually means reporting change alongside any evidence (or theory) of contribution. It also means acknowledging the contribution of other agencies or external factors. If claims to contribution are not explicitly recorded, along with supporting evidence, CSOs risk being accused of misleading people or of over-claiming.

Case study: KLP in Sudan





The Kulana Liltanmia Programme (KLP) in Sudan worked to support relations between citizens and local government authorities. Work was carried out through national and local civil society partners. At the end of the programme, a contribution analysis was carried out with each partner. This was based on a case study outlining what changes the partner believed had occurred in relations between civil society and government, or different parts of civil society. Based on each case study, KLP and partners developed an impact pathway showing the sequence of changes from the development intervention through to outcomes and impact. Evidence was sought at each level of the impact pathway. This used existing knowledge at first, but was supplemented through additional data collection exercises where necessary. Alternative explanations for change were also sought and investigated. Eventually, KLP and partners produced a set of finalised case studies, outlining change and the pathways to change, with supporting evidence at each stage of the process.

Based on the finalised case studies, KLP then used a simple rating system to assess each partner project's contribution to change. The rating system was applied across two different dimensions: the importance of the project to any changes observed, and the influence of other factors and agencies. This allowed KLP to build up its understanding of contribution to change across multiple projects, and also to understand how and why change had occurred. The rating scheme used is shown in the box opposite.

The importance of the project (Tick whichever box best applies)	The changes would probably not have happened without the project	The changes might have happened anyway, but happened better or quicker because of the project	The project increased the likelihood of the changes happening, but it is impossible to say how important they were	The change would probably have happened in much the same way without the project
		X		
Other factors (Tick whichever box best applies)	The project was the only contributor to the changes	The project was the major contributor to the change, although other factors were important	The project was one of a number of different contributors to the change	The project did not contribute to the change in any meaningful way
		X		

Further reading and resources

Some of the methodologies referenced in this paper can be accessed by clicking on the links below.

-  [Qualitative comparative analysis](#)
-  [Quasi-experimental approaches](#)
-  [Contribution analysis](#)
-  [Most significant Change](#)

-  [Randomised control trials](#)
-  [Process tracing](#)
-  [Participatory learning and action](#)
-  [Outcome harvesting](#)

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