

IMPACT ASSESSMENT



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Impact assessment involves the assessment of long-term and/or significant changes brought about through a development intervention or series of interventions. Impact assessment is not a tool or methodology. Instead, it can be carried out through many different tools, methodologies and approaches. What sets impact assessment apart from other monitoring and evaluation (M&E) efforts is that it is always focused on change, and pathways towards change, and never focuses purely on activities or outputs (deliverables).

The first challenge faced by CSOs wishing to carry out impact assessments is how to define impact. There are many different definitions within social development. Perhaps the two most common are as follows:

“The positive and negative, primary and secondary, long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended” (OECD 2010)

“Lasting or significant change – positive or negative, intended or not – in people’s lives brought about by an action or a series of actions” (Roche 1999).

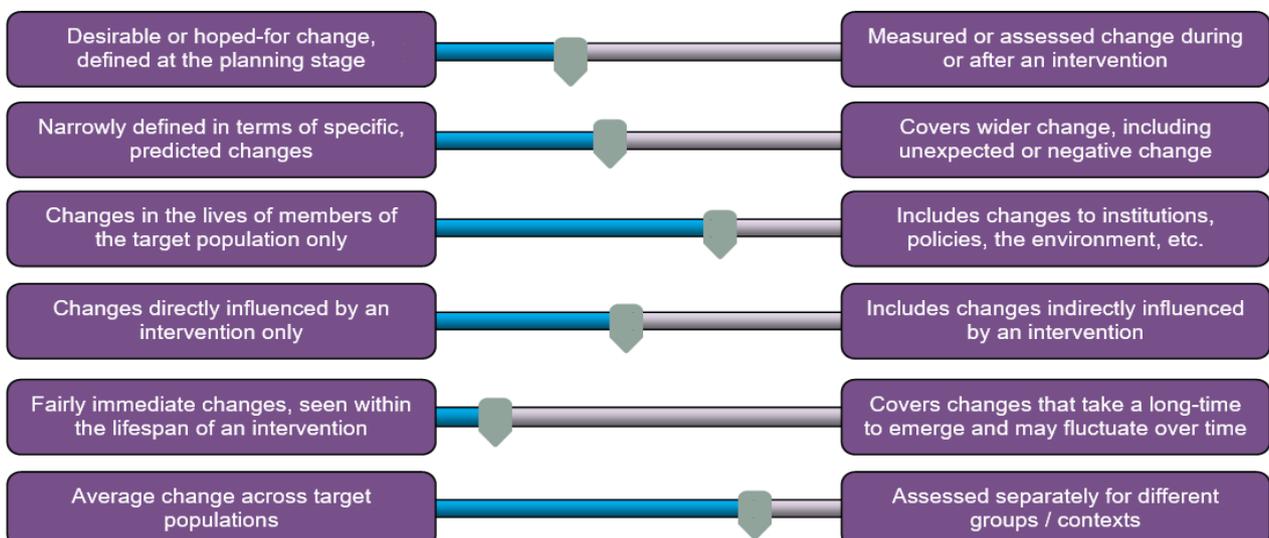
Even between these two definitions there are different interpretations. The OECD definition refers only to long-term effects, whereas the Roche definition acknowledges that impact may involve short-term, significant changes

such as saved lives within health or humanitarian interventions. On the other hand, the Roche definition only covers changes in people’s lives, whereas the OECD definition is broader, and can include long-term changes in areas such as organisational capacity and policy as well.

In some circumstances the avoidance of negative change can also be classed as impact. For example, in the humanitarian sector an important aim of some programmes may be to avoid famine. And for environmentalists a key objective may be to preserve biodiversity. In both these circumstances impact can be understood as avoiding the harm that might have occurred without a development intervention (CONCORD 2010).

Another challenge for CSOs is that the word ‘impact’ is often used interchangeably with terms such as ‘results’, ‘outcomes’ and ‘effects’. All of which means impact assessment is a hard concept to define exactly.

Recent research (see Hearn and Buffardi 2016) has attempted to capture how ‘impact’ is defined and used in different circumstances by development agencies. This is summarised in the diagram below, which shows that understanding of impact (the ‘sliders’ in the diagram) can vary from agency to agency across six dimensions. Obviously, the way in which an organisation understands impact along each of these different dimensions will have a profound effect on how it approaches impact assessment.



INTRAC takes a broad view of impact assessment, and sees it as an attempt to answer some basic questions (O'Flynn 2010).

- What has changed because of a development intervention (or interventions)?
- Which groups have been affected (or unaffected) by the changes?
- How were the changes brought about?
- How significant are they?
- Are they likely to last (or have they lasted)?

Taken together, this set of questions provides a framework that can be applied in most situations, regardless of the definition of impact. For example, the questions could be applied in a small health project, delivering significant and life-changing benefits over very short time periods. But equally, they could be applied in a long-term governance programme seeking to change relations between governments and civil society over a twenty-year period.

The purpose of impact assessment

In general, the purpose of impact assessment for CSOs is similar to the purpose of any M&E-related activity. The one difference is that impact assessment is not normally carried out purely for project or programme management purposes. Different purposes can include the following (see O'Flynn 2010, Hailey and Sorgenfrei 2004):

- to better understand what long-term or sustainable changes have occurred in order to improve the effectiveness of current or future interventions;
- to be accountable to different stakeholders, including donors, supporters, partners and beneficiaries;
- to use the findings to advocate for changes in policies, strategies and practices; and
- to communicate achievements internally and demonstrate long-term successes, in order to motivate staff and other stakeholders, justify funds received, and solicit further funding.

Impact assessment is particularly important when CSOs are working in new or innovative situations, where there is no proven theory of how interventions lead to desired changes. It is perhaps less important in circumstances where CSOs are following well-established routes to change, such as delivering mosquito nets to affected populations to reduce the spread of malaria.

Types of impact assessment

There are many different ways of going about impact assessment. Some of the more common ways are described below.

- One way is to carry out an impact assessment at the end of a project or programme. This often takes the form of an impact evaluation that seeks to assess actual

change compared to anticipated change. Impact evaluations tend to be led by external experts.

- Some impact assessments are carried out a while after the completion of a project or programme. These studies can make a better assessment of whether any changes were sustained after the project or programme finished.
- Another way of carrying out impact assessment is to investigate impact throughout a project or programme. This can be done by embedding questions on impact into an organisation's monitoring processes, and by assessing change on an ongoing basis. This is sometimes known as impact monitoring.
- Some larger agencies conduct major studies of the impact of their programme work. These studies are resource intensive, and cost a lot of money and staff time. They often involve expert evaluators, but can also involve beneficiaries throughout the process. The studies often begin with a baseline study at the start of a programme and may continue until well after the programme has ended.
- Participatory approaches to impact assessment tend to involve different stakeholders, including beneficiaries, at all stages of the project or programme cycle. Stakeholders are involved in both identifying the changes they wish to see, and assessing whether, and how, those changes have been realised.
- Some M&E methodologies, such as the most significant change (MSC) technique or tracer studies, can be used to monitor and evaluate change throughout a project or programme.
- It is sometimes possible to establish impact through research studies, carried out at the same time as projects or programmes, at the end, or sometime afterwards. Research studies can range from large, well-resourced exercises to small-scale, rapid exercises that can generate findings quickly and cheaply.

It is important to note that these different approaches are not mutually exclusive, and in some circumstances impact assessment may be carried out through multiple different approaches.

Measurement, assessment and illustration

Another way of looking at impact assessment is to divide initiatives into those looking to measure change, those looking to assess change, and those attempting only to illustrate change. Again, these terms are often used interchangeably.

- **Measuring change** implies that it is possible to accurately define the change an intervention is attempting to bring about, and then establish that change (as well as the intervention's contribution to that change) beyond reasonable doubt. Large studies involving experimental designs (e.g. randomised control trials or quasi-experimental approaches) may attempt

to measure change in selected, pre-defined indicators through the use of large baseline surveys and control or comparison groups.

- Many CSOs are unable (or unwilling) to engage in large studies such as those described above. Unless the impact they are looking for is straightforward and easily measured, they instead choose to collect evidence using qualitative methods, such as interviews, observation, focus group discussions, photography, and different forms of participatory methodologies. These methods enable them to balance evidence from different stakeholders, methodologies and locations and come to a critical **assessment of change**, and an intervention's contribution to change.
- Sometimes it is not possible (or practical) to measure impact, nor to make a reasonable overall assessment. In these cases, CSOs may attempt to **illustrate change** instead. This means developing some case studies or stories of change that show how development interventions have impacted, or are impacting, on the lives of different groups or stakeholders. The case studies or stories of change may not be representative, but may show the different ways in which people's lives are being affected.

In some cases, impact assessment starts by looking at a project or programme, and then traces change forward to see how activities have translated into outputs, outcomes and eventually impact. This is often the case with impact evaluations that try to assess the impact of an individual project or programme.

An alternative is to assess (or measure) impact across a targeted population – perhaps being less focused on predicted changes – and then work backwards to assess whether, and how, different initiatives have contributed to those changes. This may be a preferred option if an impact assessment is designed to cover the cumulative effects of many different projects or programmes over time.

Links to Theory of Change

Along with other agencies, CSOs are increasingly linking impact assessment to Theory of Change (ToC) thinking. A Theory of Change is a theory, or model, of how a development intervention is intended to produce change. Theories of Change are often represented as logic models or impact pathways that show how changes at one level are expected to contribute to changes at other levels. Typically, ToCs also include major assumptions, as well as descriptions of what else might influence the desired changes other than the development intervention concerned.

CSOs have always had their own implicit understanding of how change happens, represented in mission and vision statements, but have not always made these explicit (O'Flynn 2010). However, more and more CSOs are developing explicit ToCs, and these can provide an

important framework for undertaking impact assessment. Some of the benefits are as follows (see also Rogers 2012).

- Theories of Change inform organisations where to look for change. They articulate expected changes at different levels, which can be investigated using different methods and approaches.
- Theories of Change can make the production of evaluation (or impact assessment) questions easier, as there is an explicit model of change that shows what was expected to happen. This also makes the definition of indicators much easier.
- Theories of Change can also ensure that different stakeholders agree on what changes were expected and why, and what might constitute long-term success or failure. Alternatively, they can bring any differences in opinion to the surface so they can be investigated and resolved.
- If impact is not expected within a timebound project or programme then Theories of Change can help to articulate outcomes that can be realised within the timeframe of the project or programme, and that are important steps along the way to longer-term impacts. This helps make clear the changes that are necessary to achieve long-term impact, even if that impact cannot be measured or assessed at the time.
- If initiatives are unsuccessful, a Theory of Change can help establish where things stopped working. For example, if early changes were realised but they failed to translate into later changes, an impact assessment could investigate why. This makes it easier to find out whether impact was not achieved because the theory was incorrect, or because the project or programme wasn't implemented correctly.
- Most theory-based evaluations require a ToC of some kind. Sometimes these are available beforehand, and sometimes they need to be developed or adapted at the start of the evaluation. Theory-based evaluations may also develop alternative theories of how change came about, and then explore evidence which strengthens or weakens these alternative theories.
- Theories of Change usually contain critical assumptions. In impact assessment, these assumptions may be tested to see if they hold true or need to be changed. Theories of Change can thereby help reinforce or reject different assumptions about how change happens.

In most cases nowadays when impact assessment is taken seriously it is linked to a formal and explicit Theory of Change. However, an important aspect of many impact assessments is also the search for unexpected and/or negative changes – those changes that may not have been covered by a Theory of Change, but which have happened anyway. The formal separation of expected and unexpected change may not be so important for accountability purposes, but is very important for learning and improving, and especially for feeding the results of impact assessment work into future interventions.

Challenges

Along with the challenge of defining impact and knowing where to look for change, there are a few other challenges that are common to impact assessment across many agencies.

- Impact assessment exercises may cost a great deal of time and money. Establishing change at the level of individuals and communities can be very difficult and time consuming. And if the findings are to be used to shape future development interventions there needs to be a fair degree of certainty about any conclusions and recommendations, which also adds to the cost.
- Many CSOs work through partners. In some circumstances it is difficult to work out what is being achieved by a CSO and what is being achieved by their partners. Sometimes it is not even clear who should be carrying out the impact assessment.
- Even where change can be accurately measured or assessed it can be very challenging to attribute that change to an intervention or set of interventions. There are always many other socio-economic and political influences on people's lives, and they are often affected by the work of many different organisations. This is particularly true when CSOs work in areas such as policy influencing, where there are usually multiple different actors contributing to change.
- There are now so many different tools and methodologies to choose from that CSOs may feel overwhelmed by all the different possibilities. This can lead to designers and planners of impact assessment approaches over-complicating the process. In some cases, pressure to adopt specific approaches or methodologies can also lead to CSOs and partners adopting tools they are not comfortable with or do not properly understand.
- Larger organisations, such as International NGOs (INGOs) or large Southern NGOs (SNGOs), are often put under pressure to aggregate impact across many different programmes, sectors and countries. While these NGOs may be able to conduct impact assessment in individual projects and programmes, they often find it very hard to aggregate impact across their organisations.
- Finally, there has been a tendency in recent years for donors to view large statistical studies, based on experimental designs, as the only valid form of impact assessment. Sometimes, CSOs have felt that their own impact assessment procedures are not valid, or not valued. In very recent times this has led to a greater interest in making qualitative approaches more rigorous.

Some do's and don'ts of impact assessments are shown in the table below (see O'Flynn 2010, Stern 2015).

Some Do's and Don'ts of Impact Assessment

Do...	Don't...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourage the development of a Theory of Change that makes explicit the impact you hope to see, and any assumptions you are making. At the very least, be clear about what you are hoping will change, for whom, and why it is important. This will help direct your impact assessment efforts. • be realistic about what your organisation(s) can directly influence, and what it can only indirectly influence. • work, as far as possible, to build impact assessment into ongoing planning, monitoring, review and evaluation processes. • try and ensure stakeholder input at all stages of the design and delivery of impact assessment processes. • make sure you are listening to your key constituency – whether that is beneficiaries, communities or partners. They will know best the impact you are having! • try and create a culture of learning and critical thinking within your organisation. • use impact assessment findings widely and creatively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bother too much about the jargon and definitions of impact. In the end, most people know what they mean by impact, even if they cannot define it precisely. • over claim on what your organisation can realistically influence. Be clear about when you are measuring impact, when you are assessing it, and when you are only illustrating it. • try and use complex tools or methodologies unless you have the experience and expertise to use them properly, and understand when they are, and are not, appropriate. • treat beneficiaries or communities as homogenous entities. Always make efforts to understand how interventions impact on different groups, such as women and men, youth, etc. • ignore findings from impact assessments, even when they are not what you want to hear. • carry out an impact assessment without being clear about what you want to know, why you want to know it, and how you intend to use any findings. • use one method only, or collect information from one source only.

Further reading and resources

Other papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with monitoring, evaluation, types of evaluation, review, research and impact evaluation.



Most of the material dealing with impact assessment is focused on impact evaluation. The book by Roche (1999) provides a good historical background to impact assessment within NGOs. The articles by CONCORD (2010) and O'Flynn (2010) referenced below, also provide useful overviews.

The recent article by Hearn and Buffardi (2016), also referenced below, expands on the different understandings of impact as summarised in the diagram on the first page of this paper.

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