

Measuring CSOs Impact

(and surviving to tell about it in a blog!)

Part 1: Contribution vs. Attribution (Was it us!?)

Establishing whether a specific intervention led to, or contributed towards, certain outcomes is often talked about as one of the biggest challenges that an evaluator can be faced with. And rightly so.

Organisations that attempt to answer these questions know too well all the resources and expertise that are needed to undertake this kind of analysis.

For example, in our call, SOS Children's Villages shared their experience of using Social Return on Investment (SROI) and some of the challenges they encountered when looking at attribution, particularly around identifying suitable control groups or ensuring key stakeholders have enough time and opportunities to be meaningfully involved in the assessment.

Other organisations, such as CIVICUS and Amnesty International, noted that even assessing contribution is not without hurdles. Methods such as General Elimination Methodology (GEM), Process Tracing, and Contribution Analysis, or Outcomes harvesting, just to mention a few, require time and expertise to be used effectively. This can be a challenge even for large and established organisations – let alone for smaller NGOs and grassroots organisations. So what are the options?

If you are a funder or donor, assess the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) capabilities of the organisations that seek funding (i.e., make this part of the application process rather than a prerequisite to get any funding).

Establishing their level of MEL maturity will allow you to decide what you can reasonably expect from an organisation at that specific point in time. Although many MEL consultants may try to persuade you otherwise, the reality is that you do not need the highest level of rigour in each and every case (i.e., in other words, use the principle of proportionality).

Work in partnership with organisations that have a low level of MEL maturity, for example, by setting up an initiative where they can get practical MEL support and capacity building. Commit to stay with them for a long period of time (e.g., at least 5 years) and track how they grow over time.

If you are an NGO who has a lot of work to do and not many resources to be determining attribution or contribution, invest what you have got in participatory evaluation methods and focus on determining your value added, i.e., what you bring to the table. It is true that this may be time consuming as well but remember, you can always start small and then broaden your scope.

For example, pick a few key strategic projects or programmes of work and really invest in using participatory evaluation methods there and make them successful case studies to be shouting about.

Rome was not built in one day.

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