

Measuring CSOs Impact

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

Part 2: Identifying Impact Indicators

Any organisation that cares about achieving its long-term goals will, sooner or later, attempt to understand and capture its impact, either through the use of indicators or the collection of case studies and anecdotal stories or a combination of these.

Of course, assessing impact is, by nature, a complex exercise. It involves identifying and accounting for the intended and unintended results that our interventions may have led or contributed to. It prompts us to proactively look for negative results. It demands that we look beyond the short and medium-term to investigate the long-term effects of our work. It requires that we keep an open mind and consider the different levels at which our impact may have materialised – something that, for example, SOS Children's Villages is doing by exploring their impact both at the Individual and community level.

Many organisations will seek to identify a number of indicators that help them track and measure their impact over time. For example, CIVICUS, adopted a bottom-up approach to the development of those indicators, with teams developing their own measures and these being then used by a central MEL team to create a set of organisation-wide metrics. Other organisations, such as Amnesty International, started exploring the use of externally developed human rights indicators, such as those by the Human Rights Measurement Initiative, alongside internally developed outcome measures that track advocacy and campaigning results.

While having a set of indicators can help an organisation focus their monitoring and evaluation efforts, rather than spreading them too thin, it can also lead them to neglect or dismiss other precious insights into their impact.

If you are keen to avoid this, revisit your indicators and do that often (for example, at least once every two years). Revisiting your indicators does not mean scrapping them entirely; it means asking your stakeholders whether those measures are still meaningful and making adjustments if not. Many evaluators will frown at this suggestion – after all, some consistency is needed if we are to assess change over a long period of time. But the reality is that so much more damage can be done by being fixated over the wrong indicators than by not having a completely comparable baseline.

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