

Foundations' toolbox

The essentials of impact assessment

By Lisa Jordan, Executive Director, Bernard van Leer Foundation;
and Barry Knight, Executive Director, CENTRIS

Over the past few years, “impact assessment” has become essential. This trend is being driven by demands for more accountability, increasing scrutiny from authorities, fewer resources, and an expectation from the public that foundations will do more with less. So, if we need to take impact seriously, how do we go about measuring it?



Lisa Jordan

The response of the Bernard van Leer Foundation was to abolish its evaluation department. At first sight, this appears counterproductive, particularly since the foundation has a good record on evaluation. It was ahead of the game in expecting projects to measure the extent to which they achieved what they said they

The evaluation industry is an intimidating place, full of elaborate models, wacky math, and deadly jargon.

would. This meant that the foundation always knew how many children it was

serving, how many families it was supporting, and in how many centres. Results were easy to count, and allowed the foundation to determine how efficiently its funds were applied to children's needs across a wide range of country contexts.

However, evaluation of projects is not the same as measuring impact. Evaluating individual projects against a predetermined set of outcomes does not help us to understand how to create the conditions for sustainable change in young children's lives. It is almost impossible to determine patterns, to monitor multiple factors of change, to capture unexpected results, or even to isolate and then replicate the most meaningful factors that make a difference.

Measuring impact takes us into difficult territory. We have to struggle with big issues of what we are really trying to do and what we can realistically achieve. Inevitably, we begin to see that we have very modest resources in comparison with the size of the problems we face.

To assist us in rising to the task, a vast evaluation industry has come into being, so that guidance on grantmaking for effective impact is everywhere. The Foundation Center in the US has created



Barry Knight

a database on “Tools and Resources for Assessing Social Impact” (TRASI). This lists as many as 150 different approaches. It seems that, from a position where we had too little guidance about evaluation, we now have too much. There are so many types and techniques that it is hard for the non-specialist in evaluation to find her way around. The evaluation industry is an intimidating place, full of elaborate models, wacky math, and deadly jargon.

To help us see through the maze, we put ourselves in the place of a programme officer faced with the problem of evaluating her portfolio and wrote a play called “Kirsty and the Evaluators” (watch

Measuring impact takes us into difficult territory. We have to struggle with big issues of what we are really trying to do and what we can realistically achieve.

the play at <http://vimeo.com/8269821>, enter password psjp). Kirsty finds herself in a hard place between a demanding boss, a complex set of grants, and incomprehensible evaluators. Since there is no one-size-fits-all model of evaluation she can use, she reaches the conclusion that only she can develop the right method of how to evaluate her portfolio. It is her work so she should find a way to figure out its impact.

Our key message is that you have to take control of your own evaluation and not give over control to an external evaluator who doesn't necessarily understand your problem. You have to empower yourself.

Ah yes, but how? Obviously, it's your choice, but we have set out four principal characteristics that may help you develop a system to deliver evaluation:

1. **Owned** – People who use the evaluation feel that the system is theirs, rather than being imposed on them. The system is integrated with their day-to-day work.
2. **Useful** – Results are relevant, and can be applied in day-to-day work to promote learning.
3. **Robust** – Results are valid and reliable. The system needs to be sensitive to the complexity of what is likely to be involved in shifting the deep-seated issues being worked on.
4. **Simple** – The system works smoothly and easily without the need to have high technical knowledge. Note, however, that simple does not mean simplistic. Things should be as simple as possible but no simpler.

Taking the first letter of each of these words gives us the acronym "OURS". Or, if it's more to your taste, you can change the order and get "SOUR".

According to Mark Friedman in the 2005 publication, "Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough", there are also seven evaluation questions that will help you start to evaluate the content of your work and get to the centre of the problem:

1. What are the quality of life conditions we want to see?
2. What would these conditions look like if we could see or experience them?
3. How can we measure these conditions?
4. How are we doing on the most important measures?
5. Who are the partners that have a role to play in doing better?
6. What are the things that will work to enable us to do better?
7. What do we propose to do?

These questions can be used in any order to stimulate discussion at any time and in any place with any group. Since they are based on common sense, require no technical understanding, and are completely free of jargon, they can be used by anyone.

To get findings, we do not want to have to wait for a year for an evaluator to produce a report. We therefore suggest that results are tracked as the work proceeds, and the best way to do this is graphically. There are a variety of ways of doing this. It can be done on a spreadsheet or on a wall chart. It really doesn't matter so long as people can see the results, and understand them instantly.

As the results emerge, it is important to spend time reviewing them. Results

will not always be good, and action may need to be taken to turn around what might be poor performance.

We also have to remember that we need to be humble about what we can achieve on our own. Some annual reports of foundations read as if "we and our grantees solved this major issue single-handedly." Life is not like that.

Shifting some of the issues we are working on, such as sustainable change in children's lives, requires multiple actors. Foundations will need to move towards a philosophy of collaboration. The campaign to introduce "A Living Wage" to London, which is now accepted by all main political parties, was the result of multiple organisations working together – a coalition of community groups, churches and mosques provided popular support; a university provided an evidence base for the campaign; a media organisation obtained press coverage; and foundations provided money. Businesses, which initially opposed the idea, now see the economic value of having a contented workforce and are promoting the idea.

This partnership approach deals with the "problem of attribution". It is almost impossible to unravel the contribution of any single actor in a successful endeavour. But so what? It doesn't matter so long as we produce a practical answer to the first question in our list, that is to produce the quality of life conditions we want to see.

www.bernardvanleer.org
www.centris.org.uk

Our key message is that you have to take control of your own evaluation and not give over control to an external evaluator who doesn't necessarily understand your problem. You have to empower yourself.