

Impact evaluation - Why measuring social change is critical?

Why measuring social change critical or even important? This question has been answered multiple times by a cross-section of experts, leaders, and participants from the social sector. There is a spectrum of answers, some discussed below:

The Pragmatic development sector mindset view to measuring social change – “Social change is measured to determine if we have executed on what we originally set out to do by trying to understand if our interventions worked? If they did, which ones worked better than the others? Which change agents should we focus on and which change agents should we discard? Depending on the answers we have which interventions and change agents should be replicated in other communities and programs?”

The objective of this approach is to articulate the theory or story of change and to ensure that we are able to showcase accountability for the funds received from donors towards impacting the social change.

Financial development sector mindset view to measuring social change – “Measuring Social change is an effective way to understand and purpose your social work. It helps us define a commonly acceptable scale to measure the impact of the intervention and investment. Measuring social change or the impact of the intervention is an effective way to optimise the use of resources, plan better, implement effectively and scale.”

The primary objective of this approach is to attract, retain and communicate to donors and investors by showcasing measurable social impact ROI in ways that are as simple as one measures financial return. Since the goal is to win funding, grants and public sector contracts, everything from the methods of measuring social change to the interpretation of results should be done keeping in mind this singular objective.

Sceptical development sector mindset view to measuring social change – “Measuring Social change mainly serves the purpose of data collection. For donors, the data is needed to demonstrate to their boards/governments that their funds have been invested effectively. For NGOs and social enterprises, it is perhaps the only acceptable way to showcase results to retain existing donors and secure more funds. Donors are risk-averse, especially large corporations and hence they use a battery of checks mostly pertaining to past performance data before deciding on investing in a project/program. The measurement activity is a tool to evaluate performance rather than an instrument to draw intelligent insights and make decisions to impact social change.”

The sceptics believe that because of the above reasons impact evaluation often results in the collection of data and an interpretation that isn't necessarily true or meaningful, notwithstanding the collective waste of the time and energy of the team involved. They also believe that this drives behaviour of seeking and manifesting the problem instances in order to later show that the impact has been effective. Hence, the sceptical approach is very mindful and particular of the purpose and effectiveness of any monitoring and evaluation process.

Despite the different views, approaches and scepticism, all three – (i) the need to articulate the theory or story of change and to showcase accountability, (ii) measuring social change with the objective of raising more funds (iii) gathering data to monitor, hold accountable and justify, are valid

and justifiable reasons to measure social change. One might even suggest that an objective and meaningful way of measuring social impact is usually a prudent combination of the three approaches and is unquestionably critical to understand any progress we are making against the objectives we set for the program/initiative.

Here's a relatable example - Almost, every one of us own, fund and run a social initiative at home – the development of our children. And guess what? We are constantly and regularly measuring multiple aspects of this initiative:

- Observing events and instances
- Collaborating with teachers and others
- Specific about what we are monitoring
- Specific about the kind of data we are collecting
- Specific about what elements we are measuring and how
- We use this data to
 - ✓ understand the inputs that are effective
 - ✓ decide the kind of interventions that need to be made
 - ✓ decide on areas to invest in
 - ✓ understand what's working and what's not

For the most part, we end up doing a fairly effective job. Our success here mainly is a result of the continuous monitoring and evaluation and result oriented approach we take to measure effectiveness. And here's the thing - If you observe closely, we almost always use a combination of all the three approaches!

So, if you feel that measuring the social impact of the most important project you are running is critical, I am betting you will appreciate its significance in social initiatives impacting 100s/1000s of lives or even multiple generations!