

Assessing the Impact of Human Rights Work: Challenges and Choices

An Approach Paper to aid discussions and further research [Restricted Circulation]

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Introduction and Context

Following a meeting of the governing body of the International Council on Human Rights Policy (the Council) in November 2011, it was decided to launch a research programme on assessing the impact of interventions to engender change, development and the promotion of human rights. The Council recognises that a considerable body of work by a range of actors including donor agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), inter-governmental and governmental agencies and of course scholars and academics already exists in this area. The Council proposes to convene a series of Research Forums leading to the publications of a series of Policy/Practice Briefs. The first of such Forums is to be convened in the summer of 2011.

This document is intended to a) outline some of the possible lines of enquiry, and b) provide a preliminary mapping of the field. It is intended to act as a point of departure for further conversations and discussions and is not an exhaustive survey of literature or practice.

The **Key Questions for Research** the Council proposes to focus on are outlined below. Even while recognising that these questions are open to change as we move through the research process, the Council invites engagement with the rest of this document with these questions in mind.

Axis I: Methodology: What are the pragmatic and principled grounds that lead NGOs, donors and other actors to choose certain methodologies to assess the impact of their work? What are the underlying assumptions and logic—pertaining to methodology, theory of change, effectiveness, etc—underlying the choice of specific frameworks and approaches? To what extent are such methodologies shaping and influencing human rights practice? How can such methodologies be translated into meaningful and effective tools for learning? What is the relevance of such methodologies for assessing policy research and policy advocacy?

Axis II: Human Rights and Impact Assessment: Does the human rights framework influence approaches to impact assessment, if so, how, and if not, why not? Many organizations identify the human rights framework as their primary point of reference in engaging or

supporting social change. How does such identification with human rights shape thinking around impact assessment including underlying theories of change, methodology, conversations with stakeholders, notions of effectiveness' etc? Conversely, do ideas around impact assessment actually shape notions of what it means to do human rights work? If so, how? Specifically, how is impact assessment influencing the understanding and narratives of the processual nature of human rights work and the subjective dimensions of qualitative behavioural change demanded by human rights and being influenced by them?

Axis III: Donor Practices: What factors are shaping donor interest in impact assessment of the human rights work they support? What are donor practices in this regard? How are they evolving? What are the lessons learnt within donor agencies with respect to such practices? What is the influence of donor demands for demonstrating impacts on human rights practice? What does this imply for horizontal and social accountability, both of donors and their partners?

Axis IV: Theories of change: What is change and how does it happen? What are our methods of predicting change? How do they differ? To what extent are these methods limited? How could they be improved? One of the principal qualms with our vision of change is that it fails to account for the complexity of change; can theories of change encapsulate these complexities? Is it possible to remove our view of change from exclusively linear relationships of cause and effect? Do we question our assumptions about change and why is this important? What is a theory of change approach? How can a theory of change be described as an approach? How can leadership impact theories of change and outcomes? Whose theory of change is it? To what extent are beneficiaries involved in the various stages of a project? How are beneficiaries of change incorporated in the decision on whether change has taken place?

Axis V: Organisational learning : Can organisations learn? How and why do organisations learn? Organisations learn in order to develop and progress as well as understand past mistakes and weaknesses. Is this a limited view of learning? Why is learning important and how are the prominent conceptions of learning limited? How does organisational learning impact change? How is learning related to measurements of human rights impact? On a more practical level, are management responses to learning changing? How can learning be

reincorporated into the organisation at every level? What kinds of situations are preventing learning and change within organisations?

Axis VI: Power dynamics : What kind of power dynamic exists between people contributing to change and beneficiaries of change? How does this relationship of power influence change? How are beneficiaries involved in projects that will impact them? To what extent should beneficiaries be included and what impact does their inclusion have on the relationship of power that exists? How do both the grantee and donor agendas play into these power dynamics? How do we move beyond the donor–grantee dichotomy?

The growth of NGOs, the role of donors, and the question of assessing effectiveness

A Brief History

The question of assessment of the impacts of interventions for social change and development has come to the fore as a result of a combination of changing marketplace relations between donors and grantees, on the one hand, and, on the other, the internal desire of domestic and international NGOs to determine if their activities produce the results they expect. Beginning in the 1980s, there has been a significant increase in the number of civil society organizations working on human rights and development (or both). Moreover, the range of their activities has broadened as well, owing largely to the deficient or reduced role of the state in certain areas of public provisioning. In an environment where NGOs assumed significant responsibilities of the state in terms of both service delivery and guaranteeing of rights, their accountability and determining whether their activities produced expected results naturally came to be the subject of greater scrutiny.¹ This has received further impetus in the face of strong and well-informed criticisms by NGOs of state failure, wilful or otherwise, which has led them to take greater interest in their own efficacy. Decision-makers have increasingly asked NGOs to provide comparative data — often linked to the Millennium targets — to inform their choice between different aid avenues. Although

¹ Raine (2006)

it has been acknowledged that capacity building projects are often indirect and longer-term, they are not exempt from these demands².

As NGO interventions gained salience worldwide and expanded in scope and complexity, different actors became involved within the field including corporate bodies and individual entrepreneurs from the private sector. This was accompanied by an incorporation into the civil society sector of their interests in assessment based on competition and productivity (often referred to as the professionalization of philanthropy).³ Competition for funding among NGOs increased and decisions of where to invest for best returns became more complicated for philanthro-capitalists and donor agencies alike.⁴ The desire of social investors to see credible metrics of impact before accepting below-market rates on their capital has increased the pressure to show tangible—i.e. quantifiable—evidence of improvement.⁵ As social investors require greater accountability, it is logical to expect that investors in social change should do the same.

NGO Hesitations

Impact measurement discussions have intensified and sometimes tended to merge with debates on human rights measurement and the related yet somewhat distinct question of determination of indicators of compliance, since in the absence of the latter, accurate estimation of the former would not be feasible. By and large, the human rights community had adopted an ambivalent and inconsistent approach to measurement and metrics for three main reasons. Firstly, the concern over turning compliance into conditionality, and second, the philosophical preference to eschew numbers: when human suffering and indignity is the issue, even one as a number can be quite telling despite being statistically

² Hailey (2003) pg. 2

³ Ergas (2009) pg.462

⁴ Ibid: 462

⁵ Fowler (2000) pp.640

negligible.⁶ The majority of reservations, though, revolve around questions of how to apply measurement techniques to complex processes. Advocates suggest that the inability to conclusively demonstrate effects does not necessarily mean that the desired results are not occurring, and that many measurement techniques capture effects only partially or imperfectly, focusing on only the measurable aspects while missing the more important, but less measurable, ones. Since an assessor rarely has access to accurate pre-intervention data, and since controlled experiments and control groups are highly unlikely to figure in the intervention landscape, sceptics also doubt that finds are in fact reliable – whatever they show.

It is also important to recognize that metrics have a strong political dimension. International financial institutions, wealthy governments and some civil society organizations in the post-1980s focused on approaching freedom, governance, democracy and corruption, for example, as vectors that can be quantified, enabling measurement, to rank and compare polities. The polities in question often contest these rankings, the metrics employed and the methodologies used to measure them.

Ian Gorvin's⁷ research on systematized evaluation at Human Rights Watch sheds light on many of the internal issues that spring up during the evaluation process. He found that staff members had anxieties and hesitations about evaluation exercises due to the fear of extra workload, and that there would be a blurring of project impact and staff evaluation. Clearly, for impact assessment to be unbiased and honest, staff members must understand that the former is distinct from the latter.⁸ There was also the concern that the programmatic departments should not be held to comparable benchmarks—the very nature of human rights advocacy connotes slow, incremental change, yet there are also 'champagne

⁶ For a discussion of some of the issues see, for example, Measurement and Human Rights: Tracking Progress, Assessing Impact, Carr Centre Project Report, 2005. available at: <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/cchrp/mhr/publications/>

⁸ Gorvin (2009) p. 480

moments' in which direct and obvious success can be attributed to a specific campaign. While these moments are remembered and celebrated, advocates warn that donors should not have the expectation that this type of success is attainable in every area of concern.

The Shift

More recently however, there are signs of a clear shift. Even while acknowledging the peculiarities in the human rights field such as great conceptual complexity, the time frame required for change, difficulty in attributing causality and correlation (all of which, it is worth noting, are also claimed in the case of measuring development or service delivery), there is an increasing focus on technical expertise in measurement skills and knowledge of how to access, use and interpret statistical or time series data. The preference for anecdotal measurement of human rights impact is increasingly critiqued for its lack of methodological rigour.⁹ Despite the many hesitations of staff members outlined by Gorvin, he also notes that

“Human Rights Watch subscribes to the view put forward by Landman and Abraham in their 2004 evaluation of 9 human rights NGOs: ‘It is obvious that having in place the systems and mechanisms that provide regular and frequent feedback on activities and outcomes necessarily entails additional staff, time and financial burdens on the organization, but in the long run will contribute to its overall accountability and legitimacy. Demonstration of long term achievement of discrete outcomes linked to overall aims and objectives should contribute to the health of the organization in its ability...to make a demonstrable differences in the field of human rights¹⁰.’”

It is argued that despite the complexities or rather because of them, measurement of impacts is a promising field of enquiry.¹¹ As one commentator puts it, measurement is not a

⁹ Desormeau (2005)

¹⁰ Gorvin (2009) p. 485

¹¹ Archer (2009) p:334.

choice for human rights actors anymore, such data is needed in order to motivate the base, set priorities, estimate the scope of the problem, maintain accountability, and finally assess impacts.¹² Even while conceding that donor pressure may end up forcing organizations to use metrics that they feel cannot embrace the essence of their work, Raine argues that the growing influence of NGOs and expanding notion of their stakeholders have now rendered impact assessment a necessity. She argues against adopting a defensive position against assessment and measurement of impacts since engaging with it opens up possibilities for all actors—notably, NGOs, donors, and practitioners of assessment—to learn how effective they are being.¹³ Though what exactly they can learn is much in dispute.

Central to question of impact assessment is the idea of evaluation, which has for long attracted the attention of NGOs, donors and other stakeholders. The UN Norms on Evaluation developed by the UN Evaluation Group defines evaluation as follows:

“Purposes of evaluation include understanding why, and the extent to which, intended and unintended results are achieved, and their impact on stakeholders. Evaluation is an important source of evidence of the achievement of results and institutional performance. Evaluation is also an important contributor to building knowledge and to organizational learning. Evaluation is an important agent of change and plays a critical and credible role in supporting accountability.”

To put it simply evaluation is generally accepted as having an ongoing element (often referred to as monitoring) and a *post facto* dimension. A rapid survey of practice and literature across diverse areas of practice appears to confirm the following principles underlying suggested best-practices with respect to monitoring and evaluation (M&E):

- a) The importance of building M&E at the design stages of a programme;

¹² Raine (2006)

¹³ She also proposes a three stage model for impact assessment which consists of determination of mission, support network and organizational capacity as the first stage, definition of indicators of progress as the second stage and creation of communities of learning as the final stage, see *ibid*: pp. 22, 23.

- b) Consistency with organisational values;
- c) Viewing M&E as a learning tool and a knowledge building exercise that links all actors involved;
- d) Linking M&E to questions and considerations of horizontal and vertical accountability, including reporting;
- e) Stress on adopting multiple datasets and types of feedback, quantitative and qualitative; and
- f) Adopting participatory approaches and methodologies.

While there seems to be broad agreement on these principles or approaches, it is clear that knowing what is right is far easier than translating it into practice. Literature and practice reveals that there is very little agreement on key questions like: How are benchmarks and indicators to be set? What constitutes valid data? How this is to be collected? How are responses to be validated? The challenges of complexity, context and communications, among others underlie the different approaches to these and other questions around assessing impact that are in evidence (some of which are explored further below).

There is certainly an argument to be made about counting outputs such as the number of media stories that cite an NGO's report and the number of other NGOs using or quoting the same materials, but the evaluation process must go deeper than the numbers to see if any of the outputs are—or have the potential to—delivering actual outcomes¹⁴. While demonstrating the link between outputs and outcomes is always difficult in human rights or development (whether research, advocacy, capacity building or even service delivery), given the complexity of the change process it is often near impossible to attribute 'success' or even causality clearly. There is a risk here that pressure to show evidence of impact, when taken too far may encourage "organizations to seek risk-free results (certainty of outcomes, positive outcomes), reduce ambition (set more trivial but achievable objectives), and confuse outcomes that are measurable with ones that are desirable. This concern is linked

¹⁴ Gorvin (2009) pg. 481

particularly to public reporting and the relationship with donors.”¹⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that NGOs and think tanks generally acknowledge the vital importance of assessing effectiveness, it is nonetheless very important to stress that human rights advocacy and research cannot and should not always be directed by the lure of low-hanging fruit or impact success. As Ian Gorvin notes, some initiatives are “are purposely undertaken without real hope of concrete impact, at least in the short term; and that there is an element of moral imperative behind parts of [their] work—[they] cannot simply commit to do just what is ‘profitable’ in terms of impact”.¹⁶ The key question of course is who decides which initiatives fit this box and how?

Andrew Hines has identified the four broad reasons why human rights measurement is important:

1. “Setting priorities helps us to gauge the scope and magnitude of the issue so that appropriate planning can take place to allocate the scarce resources.
2. It informs the strategies that the human rights community operationalizes to combat the issue because it helps us to understand the root of the problem.
3. It establishes accountability by holding the duty-bearers responsible for their duty to promote and protect human rights.
4. And finally, it helps human rights organizations be more effective by assessing and employing the most effective strategies”.¹⁷

For an accurate measurement of human rights to take place, there must be a balance between the qualitative and quantitative elements as the former provides the context to the numbers while the latter indicates the scope and magnitude of the problem. The emphasis on the three types of indicators—structural conditions (e.g. constitutions and legal structures), process (e.g. programs that implement the policy), and outcomes (the influence

¹⁵ Archer (2009)

¹⁶ Gorvin (2009) pp: 483.

¹⁷ Carr Center (2005) pg. 10

made on human rights)¹⁸—is very commonly imbalanced in the human rights community so that the first two are overemphasized at the expense of outcomes. Equal to this, overemphasizing outcome measurements creates a situation in which development indicators are inappropriate in the human rights field. A delicate balance between the three is what is necessary in order to accurately assess the actual impact of human rights work.

Assessing the Impact of Policy Research

The role of policy research in affecting policy is frequently subtle, its impacts incremental rather than dramatic. Policy research is perhaps best regarded as “facilitating policy decisions, not displacing them.”¹⁹ Policy researchers are but one source of information to decision makers and optimizing influence of that source requires conscious and specific effort.

Haas and Springer argue that good policy research improves public decision-making by reducing the uncertainty in public decisions in a variety of ways, increasing logical clarity and consistency of decision makers’ understanding of policies and programs, bringing new perspectives and understanding of public problems and responses to decision makers, and improving the quality of public debate by making evidence a part of decision calculus.²⁰

Policy and research processes may vary depending on the type of research organization and the way it is organized; however, a general model can be constructed. According to a major study dedicated to policy and research processes, five stages can be identified: preparation of research, conceptualization, technical analysis, formulation of recommendations, communications.²¹ Think tanks, research institutions, human rights and development NGOs and donors have all grappled with how to assess the impacts and effectiveness of these different elements and there is a wealth of learning and experience offering insights. The

¹⁸ Carr Center (2005) pg. 11

¹⁹ Haas and Springer (1998)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Majchrzak (1984).

lessons from these experiences serve as an important point of departure for a reflective consultation on assessing impacts of policy research, and equally fundamentally understand what it is and means in the contemporary context.

The Research and Policy in Development programme (RAPID) of Overseas Development Institute (ODI) notes that effectiveness of policy research hinges on:

- a. focusing on most up-to-date policy issues;
- b. clarity of research objectives
- c. engaging policy-makers and stakeholders in all stages of the research
- d. identifying and addressing political factors that can obstruct or facilitate policy change
- e. string communication and relationships with key stakeholders; and,
- f. combining research with good entrepreneurship and networking skills.

In order to achieve the above, RAPID suggests a six-step approach that starts with mapping the policy context to identify key influencing factors and agents, followed by the second step of using an Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix to identify key stakeholders and potential allies, collaborators and opponents.²² This is followed by identifying specific behavioural changes in stakeholders to support the desired policy change and the fourth step is to actually develop the strategy by which to achieve the desired policy change outcomes using strategic planning tools. Conducting an assessment of organizational capacities to implement the strategy and establishing a monitoring and learning mechanism constitute the fifth and sixth steps.

In developing RAPID, ODI in fact draws on International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) Outcome Mapping approach.²³ The approach centres around viewing outcomes as changes in behaviour and relationships between key actors and tracking links between what a research project does and what actually happens in terms of behaviours and key actor

²² Court et al. (2006)

²³ See for example <http://www.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/11235064481Brief-FINAL.pdf>

relationships. The first step in the approach is intentional design that consists of detailing a series of aspects and questions covering the why (vision), how (mission, strategy and capacities), who (partners and key agents) and what (outcomes and progress markers) of a development research project. This is followed by the second stage of setting up an outcome and performance monitoring framework to track to enable monitoring actions and progress. The third stage is evaluation planning to enable effective learning and assessment of impacts. The approach is in principle designed for development interventions of various kinds and includes various tools to enable it to be adapted to different projects.

A study commissioned by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to evaluate the effectiveness of grants made to think tanks and institutes (engaged in policy research) offers insights and evaluation tools that may be useful for policy research NGOs themselves.²⁴ At a qualitative level it seeks to assess effectiveness with respect to factors such as relevance and quality of research, extent to which research has been able to enhance civil society participation in policy dialogue processes, extent of engagement and contribution to policy debate and formulation, and extent to which research and its management has strengthened and enhanced organization capacity. In quantitative terms, it calls for attention to policy proposals and ideas developed, publications, citations, media coverage, nominations/participation in key policy advisory bodies and forums etc. In assessing impacts of research the study suggests a two level approach, the first being Outputs evaluation that focuses on a) activities and dissemination and b) quality and policy relevance. The second level is impact evaluation focusing on a) organizational impact evaluation and b) policy impact evaluation.

Impact Assessment in the context of Advocacy

A toolkit developed by Save the Children, on assessing the impact of advocacy as an important strategy in development and change, emphasises (as in many other cases) the importance of identifying the right questions. The approach views advocacy as comprising two dimensions of change: attempting to influence policy directly, on the one hand and

²⁴ McGann (2006).

developing the capacity of others for advocacy, on the other. The toolkit calls for the process and impact to be monitored separately, asking separate questions for each of the two phases of change. The key is to draw up and agree on a balanced definition of the stakeholders that determine the success and the need for triangulation in order to eliminate biases. The toolkit also outlines a variety of methods that can be used for monitoring and evaluating advocacy like interviews, video, case studies, in addition it points to PLA techniques such as ranking as useful for assessing the success of developing advocacy capacity among grassroots change agents.²⁵

Even though advocacy may have a strong external or outward looking dimension, reflective approaches to impact assessment are also advocated. Human Rights Watch has initiated a Monitoring, Learning and Impact (MLI) programme, a methodology to monitor and enhance impact through internal reflection.²⁶ The objective is to develop a MLI methodology that is practical and pragmatic, tailored to the organisation's capacities and needs without being overly complex or burdensome is also sufficiently "sophisticated, comprehensive, and robust that—ideally—donors will defer to our own evaluation model rather than require adherence to their own."²⁷ Another additional principle is that such a methodology must be able to inform overall management rather than just knowledge management, it must also shape strategy and be integral to programming.

Alice Donald and Elizabeth Mottershaw examine the methodological challenges in evaluating whether, and how, human rights litigation has an impact in the world outside the courtroom, studying ten human rights litigation cases from the UK.²⁸ The indicators of change are defined in terms of legal judgments and the generalisable principles, changes to public policy and its implementation and also outcomes in the form of both empirical social realities and the experience of people delivering and using the services that are implicated

²⁵ Save the Children (2003)

²⁶ Gorvin (2009)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Donald and Mottershaw (2009)

in the judgment. Findings of the study point out that in order to have impact human rights litigation requires a pragmatic understanding of the complex legal, policy and social environment in which new principles need to be applied if they are to affect institutional or individual behaviour. Litigation as a human rights action strategy can be effective only if convened with other forms of action to exert leverage outside the courtroom.

Impact Assessment in the context of Capacity Building and Development

International NGO Training and Research Centre, in a discussion paper, addresses the questions of the role of M&E systems and what the key challenges are in the case of large scale development projects and programmes that are focused around participation and empowerment. The most significant challenges seem to be around ownership of the M&E process and objectives, accessibility of the information to all stakeholders, conflict with the programme objectives especially the burden of the extra work load, and balancing investments in developing the process with pressing stakeholder needs.²⁹

It appears that, owing at least in part to these very challenges, large development agencies have often approached and framed the question of assessing the impact of their work into a framework of institutional reflection and learning. The emphasis appears to be on linking outward goals to internal processes—not very different from the Human Rights Watch example discussed just above. OXFAM and ActionAid are two examples of such an approach.

OXFAM's approach to evaluation and impact assessment centres on the relevance and fulfilment of programme objectives, development efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. OXFAM's Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) process is expected to provide information that is credible and useful, enabling incorporation of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both the recipients and donors.³⁰ Typically, programme

²⁹ Innosight, available at:

http://www.innonet.org/index.php?section_id=101&content_id=433

³⁰ See <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/evaluations/index.html>

evaluations consist of a mid-term and a final, independent evaluation undertaken at least once every 5 years for all major campaigns, all programs with an overall budget of £1M or more, and for all high profile, 'risky' or complex programmes with learning potential. The evaluation process includes planning and allocation of resources, discussion on evaluation methodologies with regional and global advisors as well as assessment of the programs outcomes or impact, cost-effectiveness and Oxfam's contribution. OXFAM's response to evaluation recommendations also involves discussion on action points and incorporation of learning in future programme development, and sharing them with partners, affected populations and donors as appropriate.

Action Aid's Accountability Learning Planning System (ALPS) is designed to set out the key accountability requirements, guidelines and processes. In addition to pertinent organizational processes and review mechanisms, it seeks to guide reflection on personal attitudes and behaviours. With ALPS, ActionAid aims at deepening the accountability of the organization to all stakeholders prioritizing people living in poverty, ensuring critical reflection and learning and increase participation of stakeholders especially women in planning process. The participatory review and reflection process is a key mechanism promoting the direct involvement of all stakeholders. External reviews are required at the end of each strategy period. In addition, a peer review of each country by a team composed of trustees and staff from across the larger ActionAid. An external review of the whole of ActionAid International is required every five years. Audits and climate surveys are carried out periodically to provide additional insights into the work of the organisation and its various parts. Governance reviews on the performance of boards are also carried out by affiliates and ActionAid International.³¹

In summary, the approach taken by these agencies are strategies for monitoring and assessing impact that also integrate learning and reflection. In addition to providing a framework for organisational planning, monitoring, strategy formulation, learning, reviews

³¹ See http://www.actionaid.org/assets/pdf/ALPSENGGLISH2006FINAL_14FEB06.pdf

and audit both also seek to account for value orientation, personal attitudes and behaviours as part of enhancing overall effectiveness of interventions.

The major challenges that have been identified in the assessment of impact for NGOs in development are associated with the methodological problems of attempting to measure the effectiveness of complex programs. How do you measure compound processes such as empowerment and capacity-building? While the rationale behind wanting to see results is understandable, the demand for numbers often leads to overly burdensome, complicated, and unworkable systems³². Even USAID, who is known to be a strong advocate for comprehensive, measurable indicators, has warned of the 'false precision' that is associated with measuring the 'unmeasurable'³³. The European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) advocates for participatory self-assessment exercises rather than externally led evaluations, as they believe these tend to be counter-productive and inappropriate³⁴. At the same time, practitioners have been found to manipulate data in order to present results in a more positive light due to the fear that the measures are closely linked to sanctions or mechanisms of control³⁵. There is also expressed concern surrounding the cost and the amount time attached to implementing such systems, and whether they even deliver accurate answers to the questions.

The Donor perspective

In stark contrast to the NGO perspective of assessment, the 'younger' generation of funders on the board of donor organizations have become intent on translating business concepts into advocacy work—calculations of profits and losses, returns on investments, and opportunity costs are becoming the foundation of philanthropy governance models,³⁶

³² Hailey (2003) pg. 3

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid* page. 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Ergas (2009) pg. 462.

particularly tied to the idea of “venture philanthropy.” It is this assumption—that measuring non-profit effectiveness is as cheap and easy as measuring business performance³⁷—that has led to the incongruity between NGO and donor assessment strategies. The professionalization of philanthropy has also played a role as foundations seek ways of both basing their decisions and measuring their impact within the frame of objective measurement criteria.

Non-operational agencies are those which make grants to other organizations who then carry out the mission of the foundation indirectly; therefore, they function as both an NGO and a donor agency, which puts them in a unique position to comprehend the pros and cons of different assessment approaches. Those such as Christian Aid (CA), have departments dedicated solely to impact assessment. CA has established a number of core principles that serve as the foundation for their partnerships: all of the work done with a partner must be in line with its contribution to CA’s view on change³⁸. Once a partner is chosen, CA strives to make the program analysis a collaborative process in an attempt to address the unequal power relations that exist between the two parties. They also emphasize mutual accountability, clarity and transparency in order to ensure that the two parties continue to maintain a shared agenda, as well as to promote the downward accountability of partners to the community that they serve³⁹. They acknowledge that partners may have a limited ability to fully engage in CA’s vision of change due to the demands of other donor agencies, and note that in some cases it may be more appropriate to engage with other INGOs in order to establish a unified agenda. CA assigns a staff member to each partnership in order to manage the relationship. This includes managing all projects with this partner and facilitating dialogue on project monitoring and partnership issues. The internal impact reviews are dynamic enough in nature to take into account the multi-faceted nature of the issues that they are tackling—these include an annual review of the progress made, a

³⁷ Snibbe (2006)

³⁸ Christian Aid, No Small Change.

³⁹ Christian Aid, Module 3, pg. 2

quarterly review that is meant to inform the activities of the next, as well as strategic and thematic reviews that occur every 4–5 years⁴⁰. The approach of both internal and partnership assessment adopted by CA is very much in line with the strategy proposed by McKinsey and Company, which is discussed in more detail below.

Third-Party Perspectives—Building a bridge

In McKinsey and Company’s article, “Learning for Social Impact: What Foundations can do”, they attempt to build a bridge between NGOs and Donors by identifying best practices for social impact assessment. Understanding the need for organizations to account for funds spent and the scope and reach of its activities, they take a forward-looking approach by focusing on how to make programs work better in the future⁴¹. They note that while measurement is a key factor in informing a foundation’s decision-making, it can also lead to undesirable outcomes such as stifling innovation or missing the parts of the process that are meaningful because they are not quantifiable. The proposed learning-driven approach to assessment involves a set of five best practices to guide the thinking of foundations⁴²:

1. Hear the constituent voices by anchoring the assessment process with the perspective of the individuals and communities implementing and benefiting from the programs.
2. Build evaluative thinking into the planning process, and develop the strategy and assessment in tandem.
3. Tailor an assessment plan to its strategic objectives.
4. Find ways of finding the information you need without placing undue burdens on the grantees, and when possible, use tools that already exist.

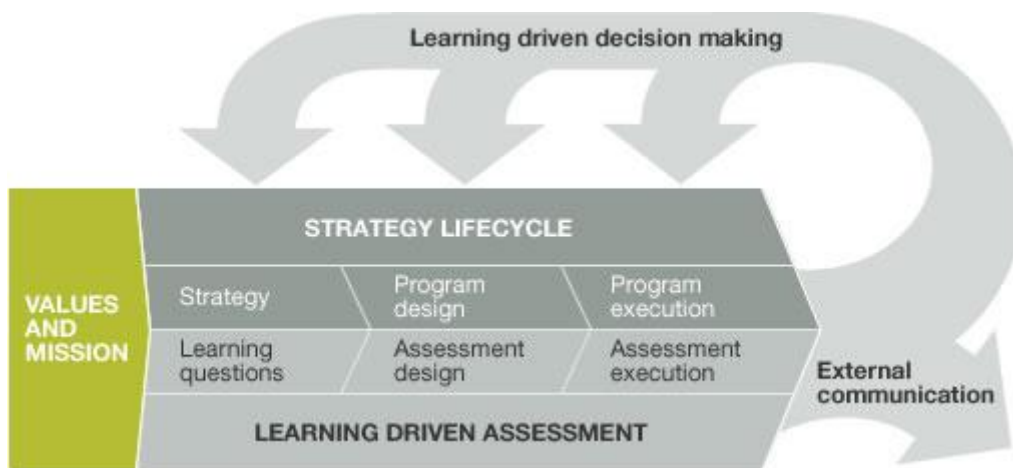
⁴⁰ Christian Aid, Module 2, pg. 2

⁴¹ McKinsey & Company (2010), *Preface*

⁴² *Ibid.* pg. 2

5. Create a safe space for honest discourse on the issues of performance indices and embed assessment and feedback in all steps of the process.

Due to the power position that foundations hold, McKinsey strongly urges them to take the lead in making assessment more useful sector-wide by developing protocols for partnering with grantees, agreeing on a limited number of common metrics, and building a system to share assessment learning between organizations⁴³. McKinsey is a strong advocate for integrating the assessment process into the beginning phases when the initial strategy is set, the design of the project is developed, and how these projects will be executed. After the assessment results have been collected and analyzed, the lessons learned should be used to adjust the strategy.



A Venture Philanthropy Partners editorial piece⁴⁴ entitled, “‘Social Outcomes’: Missing the Forest for the Trees?”, provides a unique insight into the lessons learned by a foundation who has seen the effects of not thinking outside-the-box in terms of impact assessment. The piece asserts that the reason that the dialogue on social outcomes is off-track is due to the fact that the majority of the energy is not focused on helping non-profits create more effective programs for the people and the causes that they serve. Mario Morino admits that

⁴³ McKinsey and Company (2010) pg. 3

⁴⁴ Venture Philanthropy Partners (2010)

in the early years of the foundation, they should have done more to understand qualitative achievements that may have been more important than the quantitative outcomes. A particularly poignant quote from the piece cuts straight to the point: “When public or private funders establish performance metrics and then tie significant rewards or consequences to their achievement, organizations and people will migrate to the behaviors that will allow them to meet their defined targets.” This means that if the metrics are not in line with the mission of the organization, they will go racing in the wrong direction to prevent the funds from drying up. Marino asserts that a nonprofit-centric approach is the only means in which to achieve success in impact assessment.

A note on integrating Human Rights Principles into development work

State parties to international human rights treaties have the obligation to promote and protect human rights. The concept of human dignity that underlies this normative framework is the driving force behind the political consideration of integrating human rights principles into development work, which consequently have led to new approaches to aid as well as institutional restructuring⁴⁵. Integrating human rights into development assistance improves both the quality and the effectiveness of the work. While this topic is not within the scope of this paper, it should be noted that human rights principles initiate the transition from a service delivery role towards one that emphasizes capacity-building. Due to the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights, the necessity of adopting a holistic approach to deliver on obligations has facilitated greater collaboration between related sectors⁴⁶. Principles such as non-discrimination, good governance, participation, and the rule of law steer the work of development NGOs away from charity and towards an approach that values the empowerment and self-determination of the community it is attempting to help⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Piron and O’Neil (2005) pg. ii

⁴⁶ Hamm (2001) pg. 1030

⁴⁷ Hamm (2001) pg. 1030

Piron and O’Neil have identified a five-part typology to describe the integration of human rights into development work. Most agencies fall under the first three categories, implementing a positive use of human rights.

- Human rights-based approaches: Human rights considered constitutive of the goal of development, leading to a new approach to aid and requiring institutional changes.
- Human rights mainstreaming: Efforts to ensure that human rights are integrated into all sectors of existing aid interventions (e.g. water education). This may include ‘do no harm’ aspects.
- Human rights dialogue: Foreign policy and aid dialogues include human rights issues, sometimes linked to conditionalities. Aid modalities and volumes may be affected in cases of significant human rights violations.
- Human rights projects: Projects or programs directly targeted at the realization of specific rights (e.g. freedom of expression), specific groups (e.g. children), or in support of human rights organizations (e.g. in civil society).
- Implicit human rights work: Agencies may not explicitly work on human rights issues and prefer to use other descriptors (‘protection’, ‘empowerment’, or general ‘good governance’ label). The goal, content and approach can be related to other explicit forms of human rights integration rather than ‘repackaging.’⁴⁸

More strategic uses of human rights can be found in examples such as the design of country programs and global initiatives⁴⁹. There are a growing number of examples in health, education, and livelihoods programming which illuminate the relevance of specific human rights standards (for example, the right to the highest attainable standard of health) and an approach that is based on human rights principles such as non-discrimination. These

⁴⁸ Piron and O’Neil (2005) pg. iii

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

approaches can also prevent the association between human rights violations and aid interventions.

Drawing on four large-scale evaluations carried out by UN agencies and international development NGOs, Paul Gready suggests that adopting a rights-based approach (RBA) to development work does not provide a quick fix for the difficulties in measuring the impact of social change interventions. When CARE USA and OXFAM America attempted to compare ‘traditional’ method projects versus RBA projects, they found that ranking a project as being one or the other was impossible; that in fact, all projects fell along a spectrum of rights-based approaches⁵⁰. This finding points to the idea that RBA is a tool to enhance and augment existing structures. No conclusion was made over which method had more or less impact, only that they had different types of impact. While traditional projects tend to focus on achieving immediate and tangible results (such providing life-saving access to food and medical services), the goal of RBA is to provide more sustainable impacts by addressing the underlying causes of poverty such as political, social and economic structures⁵¹. CARE International UK, though, makes the very valid point that addressing structural issues and power imbalances can be very risky, can take a significant time investment, and may be diametrically opposed to donor strategies and aid expectations⁵².

⁵⁰ Gready (2009) pg. 394

⁵¹ Gready (2009) pg. 397

⁵² *ibid.*

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