

IPAL GUIDE 1

Impact Planning, Assessment and Learning



Impact Planning, Assessment and Learning - an overview

The IPAL guides

Keystone has developed IPAL for organizations seeking to improve the way that they can contribute to significant and lasting change.

The present guide is part of the IPAL tool suite that helps organizations create a framework for developing strategies, building partnerships, planning interventions, gathering evidence of success or failure and, most importantly, analyzing and learning from this evidence through open dialogue among constituents and stakeholders who have a real interest in change.

1. Impact Planning, Assessment and Learning - An overview

2. Developing a theory of change

A guide to developing a theory of change as a framework for inclusive dialogue, learning and accountability for social impact.

2.1 Develop a vision of success

2.2 Mapping the preconditions of success

2.3 System mapping

3. Learning with constituents

A guide to identifying, documenting and analyzing evidence of impact (planned or unplanned), and learning from this in dialogue with constituents.

3.1 Whose voices matter?

3.2 Gathering and documenting evidence of impact - journals of change

3.3 Gathering and documenting evidence of impact - formal dialogue processes

3.4 Gathering and documenting evidence of impact - Feedback surveys

Impact Planning, Assessment and Learning – an overview

Keystone's **Impact Planning, Assessment and Learning** method (**IPAL**) helps social purpose organizations to plan, monitor, evaluate and communicate their work in a way that is deeply sensitive to the complexity of social change processes.

IPAL focuses on the contribution organizations make to achieving sustainable outcomes in complex systems. It fosters learning relationships among key constituents of change processes (funders, implementers and those most affected) in which each learns to contribute optimally to incremental and sustainable impact over time.

Understanding *impact* in complex systems

In the language of logical frameworks and other linear planning models, the word 'impact' has been given a very narrow and misleading meaning. It is most often used now to refer to the far-off, long-term outcome that we predict will come about as a result of all our activities.

However, in everyday experience, we all know that everything we do has an impact of some kind on the social ecosystem in which we live and work. And we also know that we can't always predict what this impact will be, nor do we always achieve everything that we set out to achieve.

Change is often uncertain and unpredictable. In this kind of complex change process, everything we do has an impact somewhere in the system. Our impact can be intended or unintended, positive or negative – and often both together. Our 'shadow impacts' – those effects we have on people and situations by our unconscious behaviour, habits, language, organizational culture and systems – can significantly enhance or get in the way of success. Meaningful and lasting social change is seldom achieved by an organization working in isolation. It usually involves many actors working in many different ways at different levels in different organizations and institutions.

It is time that we take back the word and restore its everyday meaning that everyone understands.

But if everything is this complex and uncertain, how can we plan interventions that have positive impact in the short-term and contribute towards long-term sustainable outcomes? And how can we come to understand our contribution to long-term success?

Keystone's impact planning, assessment and learning method¹

At Keystone, over the last few years, we have been asking these questions and exploring new ways of planning and learning with constituents, along with other actors for meaningful and lasting change.

At the heart of our IPAL method is a comprehensive but flexible learning framework that helps us map out the system in which we are working and understand the actual and potential role of all the actors within it.

A key step to building this framework is to clarify our **theory of change**. This involves identifying the short-term changes in attitudes, behaviours, capabilities, relationships and conditions that we would like to see in the main actors within the system and that we think are *necessary preconditions* for success. These act as clear indicators of success.

We can plan (alone and with others) a mix of short term as well as longer-term strategies that we think will positively influence different actors within the system. If there are outcomes that are necessary, but that we cannot achieve by ourselves, we can think of strategies to influence other actors or try to create partnerships that are more likely to be effective.

In short, we can begin to develop strategies that will bring about meaningful change in the system as a whole, and be far more likely to be sustainable. And we have a learning framework that will help us assess our progress and contribution to a sustainable change *process*. Over time, we can see how best our contribution can combine with others' to bring about meaningful and lasting improvement of wellbeing for our target beneficiaries.

But this kind of learning will only happen if we remain finely tuned in to all the impacts that we have on the system, and are constantly clarifying our assumptions about how change happens. An apparently small impact now can contribute to major change, positive or negative, down the line.

We need to be learning all the time what impacts (the intended as well as unintended and 'shadow' impacts) our attitudes, actions, relationships and behaviours are having in the system – and how we can maximise the impacts that we want to see and minimise the impacts that we do not. We need to be aware of how we relate to other actors in our ecosystem and how together we can, individually and in collaboration, contribute most effectively to achieving shared outcomes.

About this guide

This guide is addressed to organizations that are interested in designing or improving their current monitoring and evaluation systems. It is also addressed to monitoring and evaluation consultants.

The guide lays out the steps in designing an impact planning, assessment and learning framework and the time and resources required for it.

The guide can help you plan the design of an IPAL framework. Organizations may choose to apply it in its totality or handpick elements of it that suit their needs and context.

¹ Keystone also offers services to social purpose organizations to help them design their impact planning, assessment and learning systems. To learn more about our services, please visit <http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/resources/guides>

A good IPAL framework helps us recognise and document evidence of success, whether we intended these or not, as well as evidence of negative impacts and setbacks. Keystone suggests that organizations select various methods of gathering and documenting feedback that support each other and are appropriate to their context. We recommend many of the well-known participatory methods and are experimenting with new innovative feedback mechanisms such as feedback surveys.

Introducing the elements of an impact planning, assessment and learning framework

1. A clearly articulated theory of change

The first step is to help the organization clarify its theory of change.

This is much more than simply clarifying the logic that underpins its existing strategies. It requires participants to think beyond what they do now. Once developed, a theory of change provides a comprehensive learning framework through which an organization can examine its strategies in a new way and assess what, if any, changes should be made going forward. It supports greater synergies across organizational functions and fosters a more integrated approach to strategy development going forward.

A theory of change derives from a specific and clearly stated **vision of success** and maps out pathways of intermediate outcomes that are seen as necessary **preconditions for success**. It also maps the system in which the organization works in order to identify other actors (individuals or institutions) who can influence the desired outcomes positively or negatively.

The mapped preconditions of success provide a framework of achievable intermediate outcomes around which the organization can design direct and lateral strategies aimed at influencing other actors in the system and developing effective collaborative networks and partnerships for change.

A theory of change activity typically begins with a two day facilitated workshop with managers and programme staff from the organization sometimes supported by key external stakeholders².

If necessary, this can be shortened to a one-day initial workshop with all participants followed by a second day with a core management group.

Post-workshop, the draft preconditions of success are refined into a clearly written and comprehensive system map, and a shorter narrative statement of the theory of change.

Required time is usually a day pre-planning, the two workshop days and from 1 to 3 days post-workshop refinement depending on whether an external facilitator produces the final documentation in consultation with staff or the facilitator plays a more supervisory and support role to staff that do it themselves.

Product: A comprehensive Theory of Change in the form of detailed system map as well as a shorter narrative summary.

See our step-by-step guide for Developing a Theory of Change at <http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/resources/guides>

2. A correlated set of indicators

From the theory of change, a set of indicators can be generated to assist in planning, monitoring and reflecting on performance.

Indicators of success are derived from the outcomes that the organization can plausibly expect to influence in a meaningful way. Often they focus on changes in conditions, attitudes, behaviours, relationships and capabilities of individual actors, groups or institutions. Indicators are incremental, in the sense that achieving short term and intermediate outcomes can be shown to contribute to long-term sustainable change.

There are two main kinds of indicators:

- Short term **process indicators** to measure progress towards intermediate outcomes.
- **Outcome or impact indicators** to measure contribution to long-term outcomes.

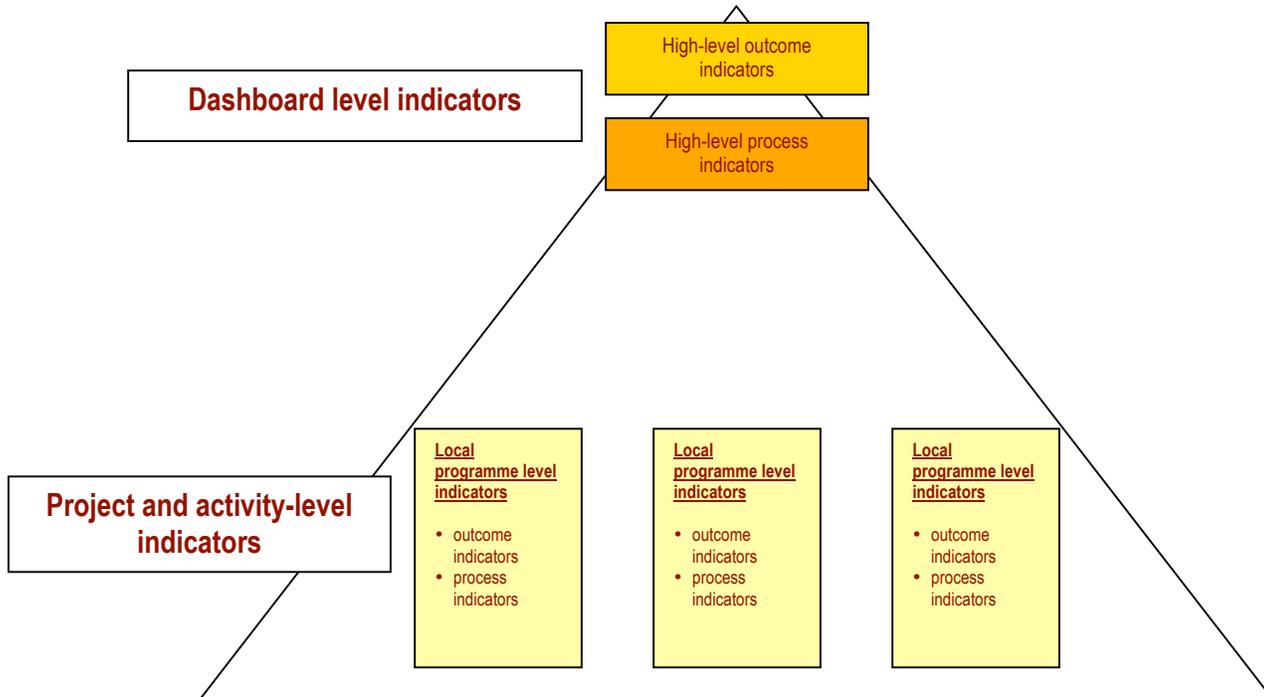
In an organization with different workstreams, it is also advisable to develop two **levels** of indicators:

- **Dashboard-level indicators:** a small set of top-level indicators (2-4) that signal progress towards the main goal, and are collected systematically across all functions and programme activities.

² We recommend that the initial workshop consists of key program staff, senior management, active members of board and one or two key external stakeholders who may have expert knowledge to contribute or who may be involved in the implementation. The feedback of other constituents on the theory of change and strategies can be incorporated over time.

- **Project and activity-level indicators:** a pool of incremental indicators collected uniquely by specific projects and in each of the countries or regions where the project is present.

A pyramid of indicators



This set of activities refines the preconditions of success of the theory of change and generates a correlated set of process and outcome indicators at Dashboard level (for the organization as a whole) and at the level of the specific programme or project functions.

This can be done through a facilitated process with a small management group and then shared with other key stakeholders for feedback. Time requirement is dependent on how much the organization is able to do itself and how much needs to be done by an external facilitator – usually between one and two days.

Product: A pyramid of indicators

3. From theory to strategy

With a comprehensive theory of change and a set of indicators in place, we can work out the ways in which we think we can (alone and with others) contribute most effectively to achieve the specific impacts we desire.

The first step is to identify specific outcomes in the theory of change that the organization can plausibly influence and design operational plans with specific objectives that relate to the theory of change. The organization can focus on achieving the necessary preconditions for success that it has identified.

This strategy can be a flexible but coherent mix of short-term specific campaigns or projects as well as longer-term strategic interventions – either acting directly on its own or in collaboration with others. These plans can be elaborated using simple logic models that describe the inputs, capacity and institutional development, activities and outputs required to achieve specific objectives.

This is best achieved in a facilitated planning workshop with a core group of programme staff and decision makers – but could usefully include staff from other programme areas (to ensure synergies) and relevant external experts.

Time required is one workshop day and up to one further day of direct assistance or more remote support depending on requirements.

Product: A coherent set of operational plans framed by the theory of change.

4. A data collection and monitoring system for learning from and with constituents

As we implement our strategies, we need to constantly reflect on what impact we are having. We need ways of recognizing and documenting evidence of our success or failure. And we need to be learning how we can do things better.

Some changes we can measure quantitatively, with numbers. These can be short-term changes such as an increase in the number of young people who say they are practicing safer sex. Or they can be longer term such as a sustained decrease in the number of deaths related to HIV infection. But numbers alone seldom tell us why these changes occurred or how we may have contributed to bringing them about.

To really understand the impact that we are making, we need to be especially sensitive to qualitative feedback from our constituents. Feedback can take many forms – a word dropped in

conversation, a change in levels of cooperation, a formal letter of praise or complaint, even silence can mean a lot – like if you organize an activity and no one comes.

The trick is how to gather and document meaningful feedback in ways that do not impose a huge burden on staff. The impact planning, assessment and learning method proposes different options, including:

- Large scale feedback techniques such as *surveys* that generate detailed feedback from large numbers of people on many specific aspects of the organization's behaviour and performance. Survey results are an excellent way to stimulate deeper learning dialogues
- Various *structured dialogue techniques* such as focus groups, world café, and others which probe deeply into what small groups of people think and feel about what the organization is achieving
- *Change journals* in which staff record the informal feedback and changes that they observe in their daily work

The way we communicate with and respond to our constituents greatly affects the quality of our relationships, the quality of our learning, and ultimately our effectiveness. IPAL fosters the craft of dialogue among constituents – in clarifying their theory of change, in planning strategies and in learning – as a powerful way of generating confidence and trust, stimulating new and creative thinking, and promoting effective collaboration and partnerships as well as learning and improving.

Understanding how key constituents experience an organization across a range of dimensions is beneficial in various respects:

- It provides new insight about the impact of the project on beneficiaries and other constituents and can inform the organization's assessments of its efforts and help it to refine its strategies.
- It informs the organization's understanding of important, new aspects of its performance
- It empowers constituents by amplifying their voice. The process gives constituents a new opportunity to participate in the organization and increase their sense of stake in the organization's work.
- It helps the organization grow in legitimacy.

The system can be designed by the organization itself or with the help of an external consultant. Time required to support the general design of the system is approximately 3-4 days over a number of weeks.

Surveys and specific implementation of elements of the system will have different time requirements depending on the specificities of the organization and its work.

Products: Overall data collection system specifying change journal formats, data gathering templates, guidelines, sample questionnaires etc.

See our guide for Learning with Constituents at
<http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/resources/guides>

5. Dialogue and learning

Information on its own is useless unless the organization reflects with its constituents and other stakeholders on what it means and what each can do about it. Documenting change needs to be followed by inclusive dialogue and reflection involving different constituents and perspectives. Through dialogue people can generate new knowledge and understanding. It helps the organization understand what is working, why it is working, what must be sustained and what must be changed. It also helps identify opportunities quickly and see problems before they become too large.

Reflective dialogue is recognised as a powerfully generative process often stimulating a new creative energy and a 'collective intelligence' as participants consciously listen to others and allow the words and ideas to integrate with their own. It generates new collaborative relationships and ways of working together.

Keystone recommends that the first dialogues with constituents take the form of an appreciative reflection on historical successes and on the theory of change and strategy. This builds synergies and a sense of empowerment, energy and involvement. Over time, a wide range of different dialogue techniques can be applied to generate new knowledge about impacts, new strategic directions and new collaborative relationships. There is a growing network of dialogue practitioners in the world, and Keystone can guide the organization in the techniques and methods best suited to purpose and context.

An external consultant is recommended here for facilitating an initial mapping of constituents and stakeholders, and the design of a stakeholder dialogue strategy. This would involve approximately one day – half in a workshop and half refining the engagement strategy.

See our guide for Learning with Constituents at
<http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/resources/guides>

6. Reporting

The final piece of the IPAL puzzle is a new approach to reporting that focuses on the organization's contribution to outcomes and honestly reflects its learning through the voices of its constituents. This kind of reporting is an integral part of the organization's learning process.

One dimension of reporting is the formal report back to constituents and other stakeholders against your theory of change and your strategic goals. In the IPAL system, formal reports should focus on your contribution to outcomes as reflected by the evidence you have gathered and the feedback you have received. Reports should be engaging public documents – in other words written in a lively accessible style for all constituents and stakeholders, and not simply to account to funders. Reports should stimulate inclusive dialogue on the conclusions and the way forward.

This kind of reporting demonstrates legitimacy and impact in a credible and authentic way.

If the organization has been rigorous and inclusive in its theory of change, monitoring and ongoing learning with constituents, this kind of public reporting will flow out naturally.

There should be little need for much further facilitation beyond the initial design of a reporting format and model. This would involve perhaps one day of short facilitated sessions.

Product: Customised public reporting model.

IPAL framework design - Summary table

Element	External facilitation	Time requirement	Products	Available resources³
Theory of change	Required	2 days	- System map - Theory of change narrative	Developing a theory of change guide.
Set of indicators	Optional	1-2 days	- Pyramid of indicators	
From theory to strategy	Required	2 days	- Set of operational plans	
Data collection and monitoring system	Optional	3-4 days	- Overall data collection system - Change journal formats - Data gathering templates - Guidelines - Sample questionnaires	Learning with constituents guide.
Dialogue and learning	Recommended	1 day (periodically)	N/A	Learning with constituents guide.
Reporting	Optional	1 day	- Customised public reporting model	

³ All available at <http://www.keystoneaccountability.org/resources/guides>