

## Impact Planning, Assessment and Learning

### A framework for planning, monitoring, assessing and reporting social change interventions

Social purpose organisations work in contexts that are powerfully shaped by many different actors and multiple factors that can influence the outcomes of any intervention. It is very seldom that one organisation can bring about meaningful and sustained change on its own.

Organisations that seek to contribute to lasting solutions must understand the complex systems into which they are intervening, and learn how best to plan, assess and learn about the impacts that they are having in the system.

Keystone's **Impact Planning, Assessment and Learning (IPAL)** method helps social purpose organizations to plan, monitor, evaluate and communicate their work in a way that

- Is deeply sensitive to the complexity of social and economic systems and the change processes that are required to achieve and sustain lasting solutions,
- Fosters effective alignment among actors within a system of influence and a shared vision of success, and
- Respects the perspectives and voices of all the key constituents of a developmental intervention and the importance of relationships in creating sustainable social change.

#### *Rethinking impact in complex change processes*

Impact is not just a remote ultimate goal that happens right at the end of a long linear chain of activities, outputs and outcomes.

Impact occurs wherever we (independently or with others) cause a significant and lasting change in a system. It can be planned or unplanned, conscious or unconscious. And it can change the system positively towards achieving and sustaining the outcomes that we strive for, or the change can be negative.

In complex self-organizing systems even small changes can have large impacts over time.

## So what does an IPAL system look like?

A comprehensive Impact Planning, Assessment and Learning system consists of 3 elements:

### 1. Planning – A clearly articulated theory of change and strategies for system impact

A good theory of change provides a comprehensive and flexible learning framework within which organizations can understand how change happens in their context and how they can best contribute to long-term developmental outcomes.

- a. The first step in developing this theory of change is to imagine a ***vision of success*** as a dynamic picture of different actors in the system each contributing positively towards a shared vision of success.
- b. Once the organisation understands success as a dynamic system of influence, the IPAL method helps them map out all the ***preconditions of success***. For each actor in the system, participants identify all the changes that they think must happen for that actor to contribute optimally towards achieving and sustaining success. This enables the organisation to trace clear outcome pathways that help explain the causal mechanisms that contribute to success and to continually test hypotheses as to ***why*** change happens in the way it does.
- c. The next step is to ***review the strategies of the organisation*** looking at all the ways they currently influence different actors in the system, and thinking about how existing strategies can be improved and what new strategies might enable them to influence the system better. This involves thinking through all the ways in which its actions can influence the system – planned and unplanned, conscious and unconscious. In particular, the organisation needs to think about whether it can influence the system better acting on its own or in greater alignment with others – and how to create and manage these relationships.
- d. Drawing from the theory of change the organisation can then identify indicators of success. The outcome pathways that make up their theory of change work as clear indicators of success that can be used to monitor the contribution of their interventions. They describe specifically what changes the organisation would expect to see – and so make it easy and natural for organisations to think of the different kinds of evidence that would tell them they are contributing positively to the changes they want to see.

## **2. Real time monitoring and learning – A rigorous method for collecting and documenting evidence of your contribution to achieving and sustaining change**

In complex change environments, organisations need to be constantly monitoring their contribution to achieving and sustaining success. Keystone's IPAL method provides organisations with tools and methods that can help them notice and document the results or outcomes of their interventions, and better understand their contribution to these outcomes. By testing this evidence against their theory of change, they gain new insight into the causal mechanisms of change in their context.

There are six behaviors involved in systematically gathering documenting and responding to evidence. They need not impose a huge burden on staff, and can easily be integrated into the culture of an organisation.

### ***IPAL and logical frameworks***

The IPAL method is a possible alternative to some of the popular planning frameworks in use today such as the logical framework approach (logframe).

The logframe is a useful tool for managing simple change processes where you can say with near certainty that activity X will lead to output Y to outcome Z. It encourages organisations to think in terms of their own narrow inputs and outputs, however, as if these alone will achieve the desired outcomes.

The result is often a rather mechanical view of change in which pre-determined strategies will achieve the desired objectives. Organisations become much less open to the many different ways in which they can influence a system positively, and much less aware of their unintended impacts or the possibilities for creating collaborative relationships that might best enable success.

The IPAL method enables organisations to navigate securely through complexity and uncertainty without oversimplifying it. It is based on a much more flexible 'system logic' that places organisations' contributions alongside others. It requires constant sensing and learning from qualitative and quantitative evidence about how interventions impact in real time on the system as a whole.

Organisations using IPAL are much more alert to new strategic options and more likely to mid-course corrections. It encourages the kind of relationships and effective collaborations that are most likely to achieve and sustain success. It also enables funders to see themselves as constituents of the change process thereby becoming better learners about how they can best contribute to success.

- ***Observe...***

Staff and constituents can train themselves to consciously watch and listen for evidence of change as they go about their daily work. They can record their observations in ‘change journals’ (see Keystone tool suite for an example of a change journal). When this becomes a habit, staff hardly notice it, yet this is often where powerful patterns and evidence of impact emerge first.

- ***Ask...***

Asking for feedback can take the form of an informal conversation or a formal activity like a survey. Formal feedback techniques such as *surveys* that can generate detailed feedback from large numbers of people on many specific aspects of the organization’s behaviour and performance. Anonymous surveys can be a safe and non-threatening way to bring issues onto the table that would otherwise remain hidden. Survey results can stimulate deeper learning dialogues that build understanding, trust and more effective action.

- ***Document...***

The IPAL framework provides a convenient framework of ‘impact indicators’ for documenting evidence of impact. A simple ‘results ledger’ spreadsheet works well.

- ***Discuss...***

It is absolutely essential that you respond to evidence – especially if that evidence comes from the feedback you get from constituents. This is best done face to face, but can also take the form of online or email dialogues, or discussions through newsletters. This kind of dialogue is usually powerfully generative – it often brings out new insights and solutions to tough problems and enhances relationships by building confidence and trust. There are many *structured dialogue techniques* such as focus groups, world café, *most significant change* workshops, and others in which staff and constituents can engage in generative dialogue – exploring different perspectives on the evidence and analyzing its significance.

- ***Reflect...***

It is very important that organizations build regular times into the rhythms of their organizations in which they can review the evidence and consider what they are learning from it. This could happen monthly or every two months – but should enable the organisation to pick up any emerging successes or problems and make the necessary adaptations.

- ***Triangulate...***

Using evidence of different kinds and from different sources greatly improves the validity of the conclusions. Triangulation should be built into any monitoring system wherever possible and can also become a simple good habit in learning organizations.

### 3. Public Reporting – Validating and communicating your learning

When people today think validation, they tend to think only of big, expensive and time consuming independent external evaluations. But there are other ways as well.

#### Re-imagining reporting

Most reporting today is little more than a one-sided story of what took place and a financial account to funders.

As an integral part of your IPAL system, reporting becomes a powerful moment for deepening learning, enriching relationships, and improving performance. Keystone calls this constituency validated impact reporting.

In an IPAL system, reporting involves two steps. Usually annually but could be more often, an organization **reports back** to constituents on what evidence the organisation has gathered and how it thinks this evidence explains its contribution to success. The report is discussed with constituents and their feedback is incorporated into the second step – the **report out** to funders and the public.

The **process of reporting** is a part of the organisation's learning process. The product is a validated record of not only what the organisation itself thinks about the impacts it is making (and what is working and why) but includes the perspectives of key constituents of the intervention.

This kind of **constituency validated impact reporting** deepens insight and demonstrates legitimacy and impact in a credible and authentic way.

#### The role of independent external evaluation

In a properly working IPAL system there is an important place for independent external evaluation. In fact, a good IPAL system will make independent evaluation much quicker, cheaper. Because IPALs generate high quality results data within a well-constructed theory of change, independent evaluations need to undertake less original data gathering within the project, and can concentrate on comparisons that isolate the specific questions of the particular evaluation in question.

*Independent comparative feedback surveys* are an exciting new form of independent evaluation that gives the organisation comparative data about its performance and impacts in key areas. An independent entity surveys the constituents of a group of similar organisations. To encourage honest responses, feedback is anonymous. The results show an organisation not only what its own constituents think, but also how it compares with how the others in the group are seen by their constituents. (See Keystone's [feedback service offerings](#) on the Keystone website).

### **IPAL principles**

IPAL emphasizes experimentation, adaptation, alignment and ongoing learning as a strategy for discovering what works, under what conditions, how and why.

It recognizes that money and technical fixes, while important, are seldom all that is required to achieve and sustain success.

IPAL sees the quality of relationships as a key enabler or disabler of success, and focuses strategy and learning on bringing about alignment among different actors in the system – including policy frameworks, governance and values.

It recognizes that each context is its own system – and that what works in one situation might not work the same way in another.

In this environment of uncertainty, comparison and triangulation are necessary in order to affirm the internal and external validity of your conclusions.

It recognizes that different constituents have different perspectives and that one actor cannot rely on their own perspectives and judgments alone. All constituents should have a voice in defining success, reflecting on whether or how it is being achieved, and how it should be communicated.

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The IPAL method draws from and builds on the large body of evaluative applications stemming from systems theory, including from members of the Outcome Mapping community ([www.outcomemapping.org](http://www.outcomemapping.org)), the Community Development Resource Association ([www.cdra.org.za](http://www.cdra.org.za)) and ActKnowledge ([www.theoryofchange.org](http://www.theoryofchange.org)). The elements that make up our approach to learning with constituents and validated public reporting draw on a respected tradition of participatory learning theory and evaluative practice including participatory rural appraisal, the most significant change technique, and participatory performance reporting (for more on these see [www.clearhorizon.com.au](http://www.clearhorizon.com.au)).