Measuring the impact of networks

Questions covered by this resource

- Why should I measure impact?
- What should I measure?
- How should I measure?
- What should I do with the findings?
- Where can I find examples and further resources?

Target audience

Network facilitators or managers, also funders, engagement practitioners and evaluators, and network members.

Why measure network impacts?

The purpose of measuring impact depends on the context and audience. For example, it might include:

- Understanding network needs – for individuals and organisations managing or facilitating networks.
- Tracking progress and achievement of objectives – for individuals and organisations managing or facilitating networks, for funders and partners.
- Gauging network health and connectivity – for individuals and organisations managing or facilitating networks.
- Demonstrating value – for network members and funders.
- Developing learning – for all audiences.

Ultimately, measuring impact can contribute to better decision-making, impact demonstration, quality of delivery, accountability, communication, and learning.

Deciding what to measure

Decisions about what to measure should always be guided by your purpose. For example, here are some questions that might be relevant to each of the purposes listed above.

Understanding network needs

- Does the network mission or purpose and future vision fit with the needs and expectations of members?
- What do network members value about being part of the network?
- What do network members want that they are not getting?

Tracking progress and achievement of objectives

- Is the network achieving what we thought or wanted it to?
- If not, what is it achieving?
- What do we need to change to enable us to achieve our objectives?
- Has my network event delivered what I and participants wanted it to?

Gauging network health and connectivity

- What does our network actually look like in terms of connectivity within and outside of the membership?
- Is the network financially and socially sustainable?
- Are the roles needed to maintain the network being fulfilled? Who by? (E.g. by members, by the facilitating organisation / individual, by someone else).

Demonstrating value

- What impact does being part of the network have for the members themselves?
- What does the network generate in terms of social or financial capital?
- Does the network offer anything to members that they couldn't get elsewhere?

Developing learning

- What do we (or others) need to change about our approach or practice in future?
- How does the impact we are having compare to other network models and why?

Deciding on how to measure

The scope, depth and detail of measurement you use will depend on context – e.g. access to data, available tools, and resources in the form of budget and capacity.

Types of data

For each question you are looking to answer (and in the context of access to data and available resources), decide on one or more "indicators" or data points to collect. Each indicator will require the collection of data:

- **Quantitative data –** numbers (e.g. number of network members) and percentages (e.g. percentage of members responding a certain way to a question).
- **Qualitative data –** non-numerical responses to interviews or questionnaires, conversations and observations.
- **A combination of quantitative and qualitative data –** this offers a stronger data set than only using one or the other (for example a number might tell you *what* is happening; combining this with other related numbers or qualitative data can help to *confirm* it is happening and tell you more about *why*).
- **Comparative data –** another set/s of data to enable differences to be seen across time, or between activities or programmes. This is vital for measuring:
  - change (e.g. comparing results to previous similar data sets to examine what is different and why).
  - causality (e.g. finding out more about whether observed changes would have happened anyway or could have happened in a different way).

When to measure

Activity or programme-based measurement? Gauging impact is equally as valid for a one-off event (e.g. asking participants what has changed for them, and how much they enjoyed a specific event and why) as it is for an entire network or programme (e.g. tracking growth in membership, gauging whether short and long-term network objectives have been met, checking the impacts that are happening meet member needs and expectations, etc.).

Baseline data. In order to measure impact in the context of change or improvement, baseline data is usually required – this could be collected prior to a specific activity happening (or even prior to a particular network being formed), at the beginning (e.g. at the start of a two-day event, and again at the end), or partway through an activity or programme (e.g. when a change of network focus or activities is being considered). In the absence of baseline data, you may need to rely on self-reflective indicators of change – e.g. asking survey respondents to say what is different for them as a result of taking part in a specific activity.

Formative or summative? Alongside collecting baseline data, there are two broad approaches to measuring impact on a programme or network level.

- A *formative* approach is the process of collecting data on an ongoing or regular basis in order to help shape activities as they develop – this may be most useful when testing new ideas or ways of working, or during a period of change.

- A *summative* approach gathers all relevant data together at a fixed point (e.g. an annual reporting period, the end of a funding grant, following a specific activity) to gauge impact and change. The two approaches can be used together, and often a formative process will include one or more periods of summation.

Data sources and tools

Data can come from a huge range of sources, involving a range of approaches, including:

- **Collecting** data from your own internal systems (e.g. membership figures and statistics), reviewing existing documents, searching for other publicly available data, etc.
- **Asking** others to provide data, for example quick evaluation activities in meetings, member surveys or questionnaires, data from members or other organisations, etc.
- **Reflecting** on specific questions more deeply, for example through interviews or group discussions with members or other individuals, or through observation of activities.

Deciding *who* to ask or reflect on impacts with is important. For example, do you include: all network members or a selection of members; potential network members; staff and board members; funders and partners; other similar organisations; and so on. This choice should be guided by the type of question you are asking, and it is always worth checking *is there anyone else we should include?*

Similarly, the specific tools used to measure impacts and the specific types of question asked (e.g. in surveys and interviews) will depend on the purpose and context. For example, your budget, the balance of hard data and supportive reflective evidence needed to assess your evaluation indicators, and the likeliness of accessing specific data (e.g. participation levels in surveys) are all aspects that will shape these decisions.

Measuring network health and connectivity is an area where specific ongoing measurements might be appropriate – for example:

- Net promoter score (asking members to score how likely they would be to recommend joining the network to others, e.g. on a scale of 0-10) - this can be used as a proxy for the value members place on their membership.
- Membership numbers and diversity.
- Active participation of members, and communication between members.
- Financial sustainability.
- The structure of connections within and outside the network (for example through the development of a network map).

Undertaking data collection and analysis internally is usually the most cost and time effective approach of carrying out impact measurement. It can present challenges - for example uncovering difficult feedback, or not enabling enough of a level of distance from the process to be able to ask sensitive questions (e.g. of funders and members).

Depending on budget, internal experience and capacity, and level of sensitivity (e.g. if you want to enable members to input in-depth views anonymously), it may be worth considering independent external support for impact measurement. Alternatives include working with someone from another team within your organisation (if relevant) to undertake impact measurement, seeking external review of plans and processes to add a level of external scrutiny, or seeking external support for part of the process such as carrying out interviews.

Choices

Measuring impact requires a number of choices to be made: why, what, when, who, how. There are many guides and toolkits available to help guide these choices (see resources below), but ultimately these choices should be guided by what makes sense, i.e. what is:

- **Proportionate –** am I doing too much or too little given the context and available resources?
- **Useful –** am I asking relevant questions that will help me to fulfil my objectives?
- **Repeatable –** will I or others want to revisit this, and if so how?
- **Effective –** is what I'm doing giving me the data I need?

Using the findings

In almost all cases, data won't be perfect, and findings won't always be as clear as you might like. Tracking data over time, finding out what type of methods work for your network and members, and developing specific evaluation questions carefully (e.g. making sure you are asking the right question in the right way, without leading or relying on assumptions) will help the development of a robust set of evidence.

How you present this evidence should, again, depend on the original purpose of the impact measurement. For example a one page graphic presentation of key statistics supported by a few pithy quotes might be suitable for high level presentation to a board or funder, while a more in-depth report capturing detailed learning might be more suitable for use internally to help shape future activities. Whatever the type of presentation used, here are some key points to remember:

- **Prioritise.** Focus on the things you set out to measure, but be alert and open to unexpected findings.
- **Analyse.** Look at the overall picture presented by the various quantitative and qualitative data sources. Utilise baseline or comparative data to help build that picture (where possible). Clarify any limitations or caveats. Pull out key messages, while bearing in mind that uncertainty is as important as clarity (e.g. what do we still not know?).
- **Revisit the "why".** Report for your audience and purpose.
- **Let the data do the talking.** Reflect what the data says, rather than directing what you want it to say.

Resources

Guides and tools for measuring impact

Cass Business School tools for success for voluntary and community organisations

Centre for Social Impact presentation on network mapping

Innovation Network report on the state of evaluation in the nonprofit sector

Jim Joseph Foundation funder's guide to catalyzing networks for social change

Knowhow Nonprofit impact guide

NCVO monitoring and evaluation guide

nef guide to tools and systems for improving quality and impact

Nesta Standards of Evidence

Network Impact guide to evaluating networks, supported by a framing paper and casebook review

Network Impact network health scorecard

NPC guide to creating a theory of change

OSCA measuring impact overview presentation

Participation Works toolkit of sample forms and activities for different audiences

Social Value UK – various resources

Unlocking Networks measuring impact briefing

Various network mapping tools

Example impact reports

Academic Health Science Network

CSP Network

Jim Joseph Foundation

Locality

RSA Community Food Projects

Start Network

The People's Network

Turning Point Network