

Berlin Civil Society Center

Measuring Impact

16 June 2011



Key Findings

On 9-10 June 2011, 36 senior level managers from 24 global civil society organisations and 11 internationally renowned experts on measuring impact gathered at the Berlin Civil Society Center. Jointly they discussed how to improve impact measurement in complex, non-linear environments as well as the political and strategic implications of pushing for a joint CSO agenda on impact evaluation.

Three key drivers for measuring impact were identified: to support organisational learning and management decisions, to underpin advocacy claims and to be accountable to all stakeholders including donors. In the light of an increased push for “value based impact reporting” by a number of institutional donors, the latter was seen as a particularly challenging driver - necessitating a quick and robust answer by the CSO sector.

At the heart of any impact measurement is a theory of change from which the relevant impact indicators are delineated. But while most workshop participants shared the view that change is most effectively brought about through empowerment of beneficiaries and a change in lifestyle of the North, it was also acknowledged that many donors and even the public at large don't necessarily share this view. Much of their theory of change is based on a quantitative charity approach, whereby more of the same will have the greatest impact.

It was agreed, that if CSOs want to stand a chance to push for their view on impact, measurement they have to generate substantial cross sector accountability dynamics and come to a *collective agreement* on what impact means for them and a robust system for evaluating it. Institutional donors, CSO fundraisers and Board Members need to be involved in this discussion to ensure that it gathers the necessary support of power and politics.

So what concrete action is needed to come to a collective CSO agreement on *what* impact means, *which* the key indicators are and *how* they are verified? Supporting the International NGO Accountability Charter, as the only existing cross-sectoral, global accountability framework of our sector was seen as one way forward. It is a unique platform that requires robust annual reporting, which is vetted through a prestigious Independent Review Panel. And if in the future this information – currently provided in individual CSO reports - could be condensed and edited so as to map the sectors overall accountability and progress towards the desired impacts, this would further underpin a collective CSO stance on impact evaluation.

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It was also suggested to devise a *plain language guide* to reach a common understanding of what *impact, measurement, monitoring* and *evaluation* mean. Just like the INGO Accountability Charter this could be undertaken with the aim to reach agreement on approximately 80% of the issues at hand, while the rest is filled in by each organisation individually to account for their specific field of practice.

Another option for the sector to push collectively for a CSO based view on impact measurement is to support the paper drafted by the Berlin Civil Society Center and numerous international NGOs on “Accountability – Transparency - Verification” for the next High Level Forum of the OECD in Busan this fall. Finally it was suggested that peer exchange and peer reviews between organisations on these issues should be formally implemented.

In devising a collective and robust CSO proposition on how to measure impact four factors have to be taken into account that further amplify the challenge:

- CSOs have tended to oversell the impact which they can realistically accomplish - given their limited resources and the enormous dimensions of the problems they face.
- There is no CSO culture of reporting failures as yet.
- CSOs increasingly work in large partnerships, where it becomes practically impossible to attribute successes to any one contribution of a partner.
- The CSOs’ focus on long term changes of the root causes for poverty, climate change etc. entails such a complexity of interdependent developments that it is very hard to “measure” the impact any one intervention has had.

The workshop offered some insights into advanced methodologies for strategic sense making in complex and changing environments and how to combine the best of quantitative and qualitative data. It also gave some answers on how to potentially improve the impact measurement of long term advocacy campaigns and beneficiary empowering programmes. And very importantly: it offered peers from a wide range of Civil Society Organisations the opportunity to exchange amongst one another and with experts from the field how their organisations currently measure the impacts of what they do.

Over the course of the two days it became clear that there will be no one-size-fits-all system for measuring impact. Each organisation has to develop the most appropriate mix of methodologies to measure the impact of their specific interventions in specific contexts. It was also recognised that there is a political and a power dimension to impact measurement that has to be taken into account. Convincing information alone - gathered through intelligent impact measurement systems - will not change an organisation, unless it is followed up by courageous leadership and managerial rigour. And if CSOs fail to come up with and push for a convincing cross-sector framework on measuring impact, third parties will impose an external system, which might even lend itself to disempowering beneficiaries and de-politicising the impact measurement agenda.