THE COMMON FOUNDATIONS OF IMPACT MEASUREMENT

This document is intended to highlight *common foundations* of many impact measurement approaches.

The common foundations are:

- Plan your intended change
- Use performance measures
- Collect useful information
- Gauge performance and impact
- Report on results

Survey

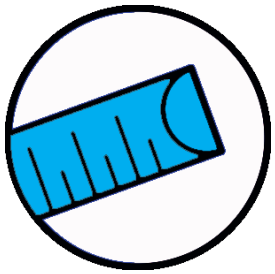
PLAN YOUR INTENDED CHANGE

A common foundation of all impact measurement approaches is a *plan* for creating the intended change. This plan specifies how, and why, your work will bring about change. A diagram—such as a *theory of change*, *outcomes map*, or *logic model*—is often used to illustrate the relationships between actions, performance, and results. The purpose is to focus your measurement efforts; to describe the scope of these efforts; and to clarify who should be involved in the process.

Common Foundation	Explanation
Describe the impact you want to achieve.	Identify the broad, long-term change that fulfills your mission—the change that matters most to your stakeholders.
Identify the positive outcomes most central to that change.	Describe which results will most directly contribute to achieving the impact.
State the main activities you will undertake.	Specify the actions that will achieve your desired outcomes.
Describe the process of change.	Specify how, and why, your work achieves results by illustrating the relationships between activities, outcomes, and impact. This can be done by using a *theory of change*, an *outcomes map*, or a *logic model*.
Understand the change process as a basis for measuring results	Use your understanding of the way change is brought about as a starting point for measuring results, and to decide where to focus the measurement efforts, how wide-ranging these efforts should be, and who should be involved.

USE PERFORMANCE MEASURES

Performance measures, known as *indicators*, are another common foundation of many impact measurement approaches. They help you to assess how well your work is carried out, and what effects it has. A good set of performance measures will inform *how* to create impact, and *what* changes have occurred.



Common Foundation	Explanation
Identify the information you need to show progress and impact	Think of what your stakeholders need to know and what you want to show. Draw on the learning from your *theory of change*, *outcomes map*, or *logic model* if you have one.
Explore existing indicators that might be relevant	Consider using existing indicators. Several initiatives have created "indicator banks" for particular fields of work. If these meet your needs, use them—aligning them where you can.
Link indicators to your planned outputs and outcomes.	Use one or more indicators for each outcome, to show the difference you have brought about (outcome indicators). Activities should also have indicators, to show the amount or type of work carried out (output indicators).
Ensure that your indicators are S.M.A.R.T.	Employ Specific, Measurable, Accurate, Relevant, and Time-Bound indicators. They show progress over a reasonable length of time and focus on changes that can be observed and measured.
Source financial proxies (if you use them) from credible authorities.	Select financial proxies carefully, if you choose to quantify outcomes in monetary terms. Ensure proxy indicators are taken from credible sources.

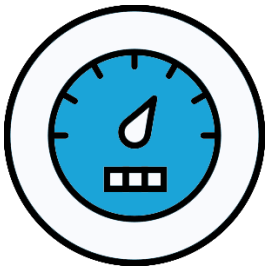
COLLECT USEFUL INFORMATION

Gathering and analyzing data can be a resource-intensive task. A common foundation of impact measurement approaches is that the information collected should be *useful* enough to you to make it worth the effort. This utility derives both from *what* information you collect, and from *how* it is collected, and *how often.* The right combination of those factors helps you to improve your work, and to demonstrate that you are making progress.

Common Foundation	Explanation
Decide what data you need to collect	Decide what quantitative data (numbers) and qualitative data (for example, case studies) you need to help you understand how change happens, and what has changed—as well as the data you need to track output and outcome indicators.
Use methods that will give you the evidence you need	Select the data-collection methods and tools that are most relevant to you; most practical to use; and most simple to implement with your available resources.
Plan your data collection	Plan how you will collect data, when you will collect it, and who will collect it. Ensure your plan has support within the organization and builds on existing systems and processes.
Collect data in a routine and consistent way	Gather information at regular intervals, and from the right sources. The task should be part of your day-to-day work, with the staff responsible given the tools they need to do it accurately and consistently.
Act ethically in collecting data.	Collect no more data than you require and do it in ways that respect those whom you serve. If it is not possible to collect data from everyone, use an appropriate sample.

GAUGE PERFORMANCE AND IMPACT

Whether quantitative or qualitative, no data set makes sense until it is presented in a reasonable and credible context. Implicit in all impact-measurement approaches is the need to *assemble* and *analyze* data. Only through this analysis can you gain insights about what works, and about how well you are doing.



Common Foundation	Explanation
Put a system in place for for storing, managing and analyzing data.	Set up an appropriate system for securely storing and managing the information you collect, ensuring it will give you reliable data when you need it. Staff should understand the system and use it consistently.
Assemble and analyze information regularly.	Examine the information collected, simplify the results, and rigorously assess them—paying special attention to patterns that reveal important differences in the effects of your work.
Compare results to assess success.	Undertake regular comparisons of results, in order to judge progress. When possible, compare results from your baseline situation (before your changes) to your targets (the things you hope to achieve). You may also use benchmarks as helpful points of reference.
Review differences regularly.	Conduct regular reviews of the evidence you gather, examining what changes have taken place, and how, and why. When possible, involve your stakeholders to help check your findings.
Base conclusions about impact on reasonable assumptions.	Assign equal weight to positive findings, and those that are less positive—including negative outcomes. You should also consider any changes that may have happened even without your work. The causes of these may include factors that are outside of your control, such as the input of other services.

REPORT ON RESULTS

The information you collect should be used to produce a balanced account of your work, and the difference it makes. This not only helps you to make better decisions about what to do next; it also allows you to communicate your achievements clearly and persuasively to others. Accordingly, your method for reporting this evidence is important for showing that your organization is trustworthy and accountable.

Common Foundation	Explanation
Report on performance and impact every year.	Release regular public updates on the main things your organization has achieved and changed. This transparent account helps others to understand the impact you have made.
Choose reporting methods and communication styles targeted to your audience's needs.	Ensure that your reports are interesting, and relevant to your audience. Dense reports may be less effective than, for example, blogs, newsletters, bulletins, or postcards. (These should still reflect the scale and complexity of your work.)
Present results in a visually engaging way.	Illustrate your information, when possible and appropriate—such as by using graphs, charts, infographics, and images. This helps you to communicate your findings in a way that is easy for others to grasp.
Show the human stories behind your achievements.	Tell stories, to help you make an emotional connection with your audience and show them the difference your work makes to people's lives. These stories may be in the form of written case studies, video content, or audio clips.
Base your account on credible evidence.	Report as fully and honestly as possible on your impact, emphasizing your checks for accuracy and your balanced approach. The information you report on should be based on relevant and unbiased findings, and on reasonable interpretations of them.