EVALSDGs Insight No. 7:
Impact Stories and the SDGs

CONTEXT: Measuring impact can be one of the hardest challenges in evaluation. Impact for one type of project/programme may look very different to that of another and may be measured at a different time. In general impact refers to "the positive and negative changes produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended", see http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/daccriteriaforevaluatingdevelopmentassistance.htm. There is ongoing debate around what is impact and what is an outcome. This discussion is wide-ranging and one that cannot be adequately addressed here, but evaluators should follow the online discussions on this topic to learn more. Also,

impact stories can be useful in policy, strategic and complex systems-level evaluations but this Insight focuses on project and programme level interventions.

For this 'Insight", an impact story is defined as trying to understand the real world and significant change that has taken place as a result of the outcomes of a project or programme. Impact stories present behaviour and organisational change in an easy to digest way, bringing out the experiences of an individual. This Insight describes how they may be used with regard to the SDGs, emphasizing their contribution to learning from the impact of a project or program. This methodology has been used for impact stories in the capacity building context but can be adapted.

Impact Data
Impact data is any information that can be collected to better understand the impact projects and programmes have on beneficiaries and the underlying SDG.

To write an effective impact story, it is imperative to build from quantitative and qualitative data to prepare a compelling narrative which can go beyond the numbers and tell the stories and experiences of participants that have been affected by the project, programme or initiative. Collecting data is only one of the steps in writing an Impact Story. See the next page for a series of steps that you can follow.

Challenges	Lessons learned
Making the link to higher impact - connecting the stories of an individual to that of an organisational or societal change.	Try to identify multiplier effects, examples from interviewees of changes in how their organisation operates or discuss expected outcomes to identify if they have occurred or not and why.
Lack of comparison group and baseline	Having a true baseline is not always possible. Try to recreate a baseline in the survey by having a comparison group or by asking retrospective questions. This leads us to the third problem...
Subjectivity - by focusing the story on one or two individuals, the story runs the risk of being purely subjective.	It is impossible to be fully objective but triangulating the answers with survey data and other quantitative data (from objective assessments for example) can help.
Time and engagement - making the causal link with the project. Differentiating between impact and outcome is a particular challenge.	An impact story should normally be written at least 6 months after a programme has finished, but be sure not too much time has passed. **The length of time is dependent on the type of impact you are measuring.** Ask the participant how their life has changed and ask them to quantify how much the project was responsible for this change.

Steps to writing a good Impact Story

Step 1. Identify the project or programme you wish to highlight. This may seem obvious, but choosing the right topic, and for the right reasons, is key to having the foundations necessary to write a good story. **Include how the project/programme contributes to the SDGs in this process.**

Step 2. Identify the relevant focal point to work with on the story. In most cases, the evaluator can operate independently; but sometime he/she is called to work with the people in charge of the project/program. Collect all the relevant documents regarding the project – background information, post-project reports, programme details, logframes/theories of change.

Step 3. Identify the objectives. **Why was this project/programme organised?** What impact were the designers looking for? Identify indicators for these objective/s. Identify assumptions made by the designers and organizations involved in the process. Identify **what** methods were used in the project, **how** it was implemented and **who** the project/programme was designed for. **Why, what, how, who.** Write the background for the story based on this information.

Step 4. Identify relevant linkages with the 2030 Agenda. Anticipate the preconditions or outcomes that must be in place to contribute to the goal/s and the intermediate outcomes that relate to these conditions.

Step 5. Identify the methods to be used. The impact story is written to show the overall picture and the individual experience. **This step takes the form of a Most Significant Change (MSC) approach.** It is best to use **quantitative data** on the project/programme, triangulated with **qualitative interviews** with participants.
  - If quantitative data does not exist, create a survey of beneficiaries. The counterfactual will be established through comparison groups, when possible, but this is not always feasible.
  - Interviews should be semi-structured, and questions should be of a general nature – the participant should not prepare answers. Focus on the impact the project/programme had on behaviour, how it has changed work and attitudes, do not only focus on successes, and try to work out the counterfactual (had the project not taken place) together.

Step 6. Write a narrative based on the interviews. Focus on expected and unexpected, intended and unintended, direct and indirect impact/outcome areas; try to connect the individual story to the overall project and societal/organisational change. **Make links with the theory of change and to the SDGs explicit**, and what indicators can be illustrated based on the interviews and other data. Show the personal impact and change the project/programme had on participants. Decide what data to visualise; be conservative with conclusions.

Most Significant Change and the Sustainable Development Goals

An impact story is not a success story. It is a narrative approach to engage beneficiaries in the evaluation process by allowing them to share their own experience-based knowledge as well as highlight both positive and negative elements of a project/programme. This narrative approach can also highlight potential areas for improvement and support the numerical data derived from traditional evaluation measures.

The MSC approach involves generating and analysing personal accounts of change and deciding which of these accounts is the most significant, and why. MSC is not just about collecting and reporting stories but about having processes to learn from these stories, and similarities and differences in what the various different groups and individuals value. **Finally, it is fundamental to link the MSC with the SDGs through identifying the changes which have an impact on specific goals, and then describing how the sum of such changes contributes to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.**