

Demystifying outcomes measurement and reporting

By Melanie Bainbridge

Outcomes measurement and reporting are tools that can be used to help you to manage your initiatives with a focus on the benefits they seek to achieve.

Knowing what outcomes are being achieved, for whom and to what extent, can help your organization to create powerful impact narratives that resonate with key stakeholders including your funders, beneficiaries, policymakers, and the public. It can also be useful in empowering your staff and supporters by clearly showing how progress towards your vision is being achieved.

Writing a great outcomes report for grant application or communications purposes is not a 'dark art,' but it does require a systematic approach that includes several key elements.

Remind me, what is an outcome?

Outcomes typically refer to the difference, change or benefit you expect your initiative to make.

Often it is easiest to figure them out by thinking about what you would like to see happen once your initiative is completed and successful. For example, if your initiative is a community event designed to help seniors reconnect after a period of isolation, then your outcomes might be a reduced sense of loneliness and increased sense of belonging in your target community.

Long-term outcomes or broader social and systemic change are often referred to as impacts. These can be more difficult to measure and attribute to any single initiative or intervention; however, it is still useful to think about how your initiative is contributing to impact and align shorter term outcomes to this understanding.

Outcomes are different to activities and outputs in that they focus on change that occurs, not just how many times an activity is completed or the count of people who attended. This is because activities and outputs are not the change themselves, rather they are things the initiative implemented to try to achieve the intended benefit. Whether the activities and outputs were successful in producing outcomes needs to be checked against their own measures.

Outcomes can be intended and unintended, and positive or negative in nature. When measuring outcomes, it pays to stay observant for any unintended change that might be happening, which can often be just as important as the expected outcomes.

Plan to measure outcomes from the outset.

Planning for outcomes measurement after you have completed your initiative reduces the options you have for measurement and limits you to looking at what happened in retrospect.

In particular, opportunities to embed learning and continuous improvement from outcomes measurement into your initiative can be lost, and key insights may be identified too late to be actionable. You may also miss the opportunity to apply powerful approaches like baseline

measurement (measuring the 'state of play' before your initiative or intervention), which can demonstrate how trends changed over time, and point to the influence your initiative had in making these changes.

All is not lost if you do find yourself needing to gather data and measure outcomes retrospectively, however the quality and immediacy of your data, and your ability to connect with stakeholders, is likely to be limited. So, to give an initiative the best chance of success, planning for outcomes measurement needs to be embedded in the planning and design phase.

Use your outcomes measurement to tell a compelling, evidence-based story.

At the heart of any impact narrative is evidence. Evidence requires data collection of some kind. Data can take many forms, including qualitative and quantitative data, case studies, testimonials, and stories. The key is to use a range of data sources to build a comprehensive picture of your impact.

But, noting that collecting data takes time and effort, the goal is to collect only useful data to make that effort worthwhile.

The effort and extent you should go to is influenced by many factors, including, the overall scale and budget of your project, whether your initiative follows an established approach or is novel or innovative (e.g., a pilot), and the expectations of the audience that you need to communicate with (e.g., your Board, collaboration partners, or a funder). It is also important to understand your purpose - the reasons you need to measure your outcomes, so you can focus your resources on collecting the best data that produces the evidence you need.

To break it down, here are the steps you can follow to successfully measure the outcomes of your project:

1. Use clearly defined outcomes: Ideally these outcomes are clear and distinct with a separate statement for each change you are trying to make. It can make designing indicators harder when many outcomes are combined into one statement, or if phrases that describe activities and objectives are mixed in with the outcome.

Or in other words: Make sure you can articulate what success looks like for your project.

2. Choose appropriate indicators: An indicator is a sign that an outcome is being achieved. Indicators are based on measures that can show whether the change sought is happening as a result of your initiative. Strong indicators are simple, accurate, and timely. It can be ideal if you can find an existing data source that is relevant to your outcomes to serve as an indicator, as this will ensure you're not duplicating effort. For example, you may find publicly available indicators, such as those found on existing indicator banks like Amplify Social Impact's, [Indicator Bank](#) or University of Technology, Sydney's social impact measurement tools [here](#), that can help you validate your impact.

Or in other words: Make sure you know what information will tell you whether you made a difference.

3. Develop a data collection plan: To collect evidence, you need to develop a plan for data collection. Identify what data needs to be collected, who will collect it, how it will be collected, and when it will be collected. Always consider the ethical and practical issues involved in data collection, such as cultural sensitivity, data sovereignty, confidentiality, and privacy.

Or in other words: Figure out how you will collect the information that will help you tell your story.

4. Analyze the data: Once you have collected the data, you will need to analyze it to figure out what it is telling you about whether you have achieved the outcomes you articulated at the beginning of your initiative. You should also consider the limitations of your data and the potential biases that may be present. Qualitative data (e.g., case notes, stories of change, interviews, and yarning) is often best presented as themes and stories that communicate meaning and depth. Quantitative data often uses counts, charts and visualizations that summarize change across groups of people.

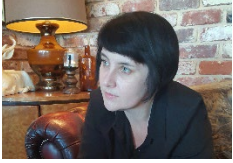
Or in other words: Look at all the info you have gathered and figure out what it means. You might need to use some fancy math, but hopefully not too much.

5. Report the results: The final step is to report your results. Provide a clear and concise summary of your findings, including any limitations or challenges you encountered. Explore the implications of your findings and how they relate to your initiative's goals and objectives.

Or in other words: Put it all together in a report that's easy to read and shows how great your initiative is. Make sure you're honest about any problems or challenges you faced along the way.

It's important to be transparent about your successes and challenges. No initiative or intervention is perfect, and it's important to acknowledge where things haven't gone according to plan and to share what you have learned from those experiences. These learnings can be incredibly valuable not only for growth within your own organization, but also for others working in similar fields or with similar communities. Being open about your challenges, and how you approached them, also helps to build trust with your stakeholders and demonstrates your commitment to continuous improvement.

In closing, having a solid plan for how you will measure your outcomes and report on them to your stakeholders can provide the basis of an advocacy plan and help to access future funding opportunities. By defining outcomes, using evidence, and being transparent and honest, organizations can create powerful narratives that inspire change and create lasting impact.



Author: Melanie Bainbridge

Melanie Bainbridge is a writer, sustainability professional, multi-arts professional and social impact advocate. Mel melds 20+ years of strategy, policy, project management and community engagement experience with communications and creative development skills to create inspiring impact narratives. Melanie is currently Senior Manager Knowledge & Insights, Lotterywest.