

The Center for High Impact Philanthropy

School of Social Policy & Practice | University of Pennsylvania
In collaboration with alumni from the Wharton School

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**WOMEN
MOVING
MILLIONS**

What Are We Talking About When We Talk About Impact?

WHY THIS PAPER?

The word “impact” is everywhere these days, but not everyone uses or understands it in the same way.

Why does this matter? A clear definition of impact is necessary to develop an effective and rewarding philanthropic strategy, since impact definitions drive decisions and ultimately move dollars. Differing—but unvoiced—assumptions about the definition of impact can also create communication difficulties between donors, grantees, and beneficiaries.

Donors have a particular obligation to seek clarity and consensus with regard to definitions of impact, as their definitions often carry disproportionate weight: programs can have more of an incentive to satisfy funders than beneficiaries. In particular, for donors focused on historically disempowered groups such as women and girls, it is critical to include those beneficiary voices in the impact definition process; otherwise, philanthropic efforts run

the risk of recreating the same imbalanced power dynamics they are trying to counteract.

To address the needs of donors navigating this complicated impact landscape, this paper explores current definitions of impact in philanthropy and international development, with a particular focus on the ways impact definition can affect work serving women and girls. Our hope is that it will be useful to donors developing their own definitions of impact; we also hope to clarify the many (sometimes conflicting) uses of the term impact, and the real-world repercussions of those uses. To that end, we present patterns of impact definition from three main perspectives: a) evaluation professionals; b) funders; and c) beneficiaries, particularly women and girls. We have also attempted to keep our “gender and bias lenses” on, highlighting where certain definitions may favor or discriminate against certain groups or situations.

About The Center for High Impact Philanthropy

Founded in 2006, the Center for High Impact Philanthropy has emerged as a unique and trusted authority for donors seeking to maximize the social impact of their funds. We help move money to do more good through: independent analysis, advice, and thought-leadership. In areas as diverse as closing the achievement gap in the U.S., providing basic needs to the most economically vulnerable families, effective disaster relief after Haiti's earthquake, and major global public health issues such as malaria and child mortality, the Center translates the best available information into actionable guidance for those looking to make the greatest difference in the lives of others. Put simply, success to us means enabling more money to do more good.

About Women Moving Millions

WMM is a diverse community of extraordinary individuals committed to funding the advancement of women and girls around the globe. Members are passionately committed to mobilizing unprecedented resources and donate at levels of \$1 million or more, in the process sparking a larger movement of trailblazing philanthropists working to enhance the potential of half the world's citizens.

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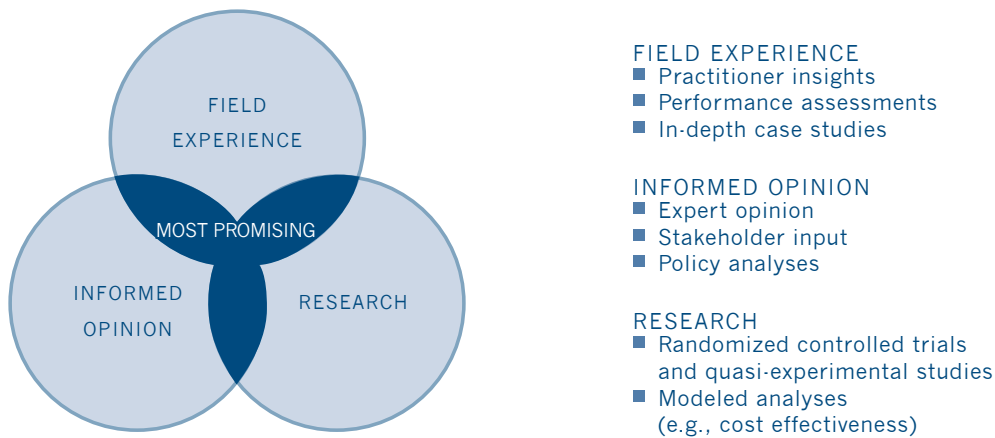
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APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

To meet our goal of providing smart, practical guidance to donors, we synthesize the best available information from three domains: research, informed opinion, and field experience. By considering evidence from these three sources, we seek to leverage the strengths while minimizing the limitations of each. We believe the most promising opportunities exist where the recommendations of these three domains overlap.



In the development of this paper, the Center’s multidisciplinary team examined over 50 sources of information, including available academic research, policy briefs, and foundation materials. We drew from recognized experts in program evaluation, non-profit leaders, and websites and publications of the 10 largest U.S. foundations. We also reviewed literature on giving by individual donors and the literature on beneficiary voice in program development and evaluation. The goal was not to conduct an exhaustive review at this stage, but to provide an overview of the landscape of impact definition. While we touch on issues of impact measurement, a full discussion of measurement approaches is beyond the scope of this paper. Please see accompanying bibliography for additional information.

The end result is the following report, with which we hope to provide a framework for considering impact definitions and a foundation for continuing discussion of this important issue. Going forward, this document will anchor our additional guidance on impact definition and its implications, both for donors and for the populations they aim to serve.

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IMPACT

Noun: a) the action of one object coming forcibly into contact with another; b) the effect of one person, thing or action on another.

Verb: a) come into forcible contact with another object; b) (impact on) to have a strong effect on someone or something.

From Latin *impingere*, to push against, drive in—first use early 17th Century.

Oxford English Dictionary

SOME EXAMPLES OF USAGE

"As I have said, the first thing is to be honest with yourself. You can never have an impact on society if you have not changed yourself...Great peacemakers are all people of integrity, of honesty, but humility." *Nelson Mandela, Statesman, Former President of South Africa*

"If you think you are too small to have an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito." *Anita Roddick, Founder, The Body Shop*

"We test our assumptions and track achievements by measuring outcomes and impacts, and by understanding how and why we have succeeded or failed. Outcomes are the immediate, intended or achieved changes in technologies, systems, populations or behaviors; impacts are the ultimate, sustainable changes that we seek." *The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation*

"Everyone's got their own definition of impact and here's ours: impact is a change in the state of the world brought about by an intervention. It's the final result of behaviors (outcomes) that are generated by activities (outputs) that are driven by resources (inputs)." *Kevin Starr and Laura Hattendorf, Mulago Foundation*

"(Impact) is the overall differences an organization, programme, or intervention makes. We use the terms "impact" and "results" interchangeably throughout this report." *Dan Corry, New Philanthropy Capital, London*

"Impact = ideas x implementation." *Caroline Fiennes, Giving Evidence*

"My life is not to be somebody else's impact – you know what I mean?" *Alice Walker, novelist, author of The Color Purple*

I. INTRODUCTION: CLARIFYING ASSUMPTIONS IN DEFINING IMPACT

Looking across the quotations at the beginning of this paper, one sees the words “effect,” “change,” “differences,” and “results.” These quotes reflect the fact that for most people, impact implies a change brought about by some sort of action. Moreover, with the exception of the perspective represented by the Alice Walker quote, the effect or change is generally presumed to be positive. The accuracy of these assumptions is explored further in this paper, but our analysis indicates that they are widespread.

The type of change and the relationship between action and change is explored further in the paper, but five key points have emerged from our analysis as areas where misunderstandings are common. To help frame the discussion going forward, we make the following observations:

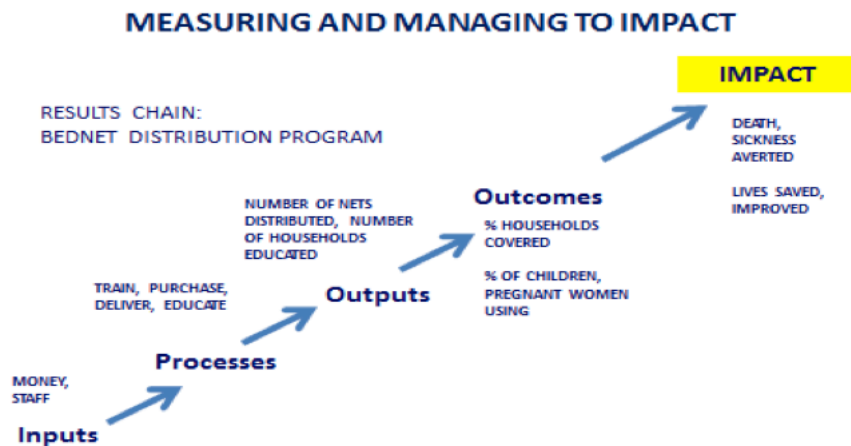
- **Actions can fail to produce change due to a host of factors.** The absence of observed change does not necessarily indicate an ineffective action (see third observation below).
- **Actions can produce unanticipated changes, including negative ones.** Impact is not always positive, and negative impact is not always evidence of an ineffective intervention.

- **Actions which prevent a particular change, even if they do not change the overall status quo, can still have an impact.** Maintaining the status quo is an impact, if the alternate scenario is a worsening situation-- for instance, blowing up a meteor which otherwise would destroy a city.

- **Change can occur and be observed independent of a particular action.** Measuring outcomes and impacts can happen even without measuring a particular intervention’s contribution or lack thereof. The moon can be observed rising, whether or not a pack of wolves howls at it.

- **Impact sought is subjective; it is defined by a person or group and for a person or group.** Impact definitions are not abstract, objective truths. They are the product of decisions made by people and organizations, and they often aim to change behaviors or situations for those on the receiving end of an intervention. This is not always problematic, but it must be recognized in order to account for potential bias or disempowerment.

It is also important to clarify some of the vocabulary around impact. Many discussions of impact explicitly or implicitly refer to what evaluation professionals call the impact, value, or results chain, representing actions and resources along with their expected effects. Those effects are described as outcomes, which lead to impacts. An example of a results chain for lowering malaria prevalence is presented below:



While the example may appear straightforward, achieving clarity about what is impact versus outcome can become very difficult—for instance, if you raise the average income of women within the community, is that impact? Or is it an intermediate outcome, contributing to the larger impact of raising women’s status within that community? There is no single right answer; it is simply necessary to define “impact” clearly at the start.

Relatedly, definitions can also shift depending on where an organization or actor is located within a particular chain; many groups and interventions work toward the same goals, and each group may define their outcomes and impact within a single smaller portion of the broader impact chain. Finally, to add to the general confusion, the two terms are often confounded or used interchangeably in practice.

2. TECHNICAL DEFINITIONS: THE PROGRAM EVALUATION PERSPECTIVE

While there is divergence amongst program evaluation experts with regard to the *methodology* of impact measurement, we found a modest but broad consensus with regard to *definitions*. For most program evaluation experts, the definition of impact is quite specific, and differs in important ways from colloquial uses common outside of the evaluation world.

In particular, technical definitions address the issue of causality, or attribution of results to a specific intervention. **For this group, the causal link between action and change must be tight, ideally measurable, and generally must include consideration of what might have happened in the absence of the action.**⁴ The more definitively causality can be established, the more “rigorous” the evaluation of impact. Impact for this group is also differentiated from outcomes: it is an overall assessment

of change attributable to an intervention. Sometimes there is also a temporal distinction made, with “impact” being defined as longer-term, sustainable change, as opposed to shorter-term outcomes.

“One must look beyond outcomes to ask whether the strategy actually had impact. Although an organization and its funders may rightly take pleasure in seeing their intended outcome occur, the value of their work depends on whether the outcome would or would not otherwise have occurred.”

– Paul Brest, *The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation*

“To slightly oversimplify, [impact is] the results that can be directly attributed to the outcomes of a given program or collective of programs, as determined by evaluations that are capable of factoring out (at a high level of statistical probability) other explanations for how these results came to be.”

– Mario Morino, *Venture Philanthropy Partners*

3. COLLOQUIAL DEFINITIONS: DONOR AND NON-PROFIT PERSPECTIVES

In reviewing “colloquial” definitions and uses of impact, we considered the stakeholders commonly involved in philanthropic donations or investments, such as foundations, individual donors, non-profits, and social impact investors (beneficiary perspectives are discussed in the following section). In contrast to the relative consensus found among program evaluation experts, these groups demonstrated considerable diversity regarding the use and implied definitions of the word impact.

⁴ Well known figures who either share or at least deeply understand and discuss the technical perspective include Paul Brest, Caroline Fiennes, David Hunter, Elizabeth King, Ruth Levine, Tris Lumley, Mario Morino, Martin Ravallion, Sean Stannard-Stockton, Kevin Starr, Tom Tierney, and Howard White.

Foundations: As a first step in our scan, we reviewed the websites and publicly available evaluation materials from the 10 largest foundations in the U.S. (by asset size). In the publicly available materials for these foundations, language around impact is common, though not universal, and there is variation in the ways that foundations apply the term to their work.

When they exist, publicly available impact definitions are most often foundation-specific, and related to particular areas, indicators or outcomes that the foundation presumes to directly affect. Technical, conceptual definitions of impact (in the manner of evaluation professionals) are less common, though some impact-focused foundations are exceptions.⁵ There is a strong assumption that what the foundation is trying to achieve is a public good, and outcomes related to that good are evidence of the foundation's impact. While in-depth discussions around mission definition, impact measurement, and related concepts may happen behind the scenes, public materials tend more towards the colloquial: "something good", not necessarily "a measurable, attributable change."

When they do discuss their own impact, foundations often explicitly reference outcomes of grantees. Focusing at the outcome level allows foundations to draw clear causal links—they provide dollar inputs, and their grantees return these outcomes. In some ways, this approach is also attribution-focused, but the limits of measuring attribution set the boundary of impact definition, rather than the definition driving the limits of measurement. This approach is not always entirely satisfying, as this quotation from the Ford Foundation suggests:

"No single grant or grantee can, on its own, bring about the kinds of broad social change we seek, such as improving the transparency and effectiveness of government, preventing gender discrimination, or enabling families to move out of poverty. For this reason, we assess the effectiveness of our work at multiple levels: strategic initiative, general approach, and individual grant."

– *The Ford Foundation*

In this case, the foundation distinguishes between the impact it seeks and the set of outcomes any individual organization is poised to deliver.

Individual Donors: Individual donors are a very heterogeneous group. A number of studies over the past few years, however, have attempted to draw at least broad conclusions regarding high net worth donor characteristics and trends.^{6,7,8} Although donors may not use the word "impact," they are clearly concerned with results:

"Most donors, regardless of the vocabulary they use, want their donations to produce results. What characterizes "results" may be very different to various donors. Sometimes the desire to see results can lead donors to seek indicators, like low overhead expense ratios, that are actually bad proxies for results. Sometimes the "result" a donor seeks might simply be public recognition. But believing that donors do not seek results is akin to believing that they would be just as happy throwing their money in the trash."

– *Linda Raftree, Special Advisor to the Rockefeller Foundation's Evaluation Office*⁹

⁵ Note the definitions by the Gates and Mulago foundations in the beginning quotations section, for example.

⁶ Katherina M. Rosqueta, Kathleen Noonan, and Miriam Shark. "I'm Not Rockefeller: Implications for Major Foundations Seeking to Engage Ultra- High-Net-Worth Donors," 2011. *The Foundation Review*: Vol. 3: Iss. 4, Article 9.

⁷ Hope Consulting. *Money for Good II: Driving Dollars to the Highest-Performing Non-Profits*, 2011. <http://www.guidestar.org/View-CmsFile.aspx?ContentID=4038>

⁸ Bank of America and The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. *The 2012 Bank of America Study of High Net Worth Philanthropy: Issues Driving Charitable Activities Among Wealthy Households*, November 2012. http://newsroom.bankofamerica.com/files/press_kit/additional/2012_BAC_Study_of_High_Net_Worth_Philanthropy_0.pdf.

⁹ Sean Stannard-Stockton "Getting Results: Outputs, Outcomes & Impact." *Tactical Philanthropy*. June 29, 2010. <http://www.tactical-philanthropy.com/2010/06/outputs-outcomes-impact-oh-my/> Note also findings of 2012 Cygnus study: http://www.cygnusresearch.com/files/free/Exec_Summary-The_Cygnus_Donor_Survey_2012-US.pdf

In comparison with foundations which tend to be more explicitly mission-driven, a preponderance of donors are concerned with giving to non-profits that speak to a personal interest. Results or impact for them may be tied not just to what that organization accomplishes in terms of outcomes, but also how involvement in that organization changes them, or makes them feel. “Impact,” therefore, may be a two-way street. That said, a 2012 study found that high net worth individuals gave more to those non-profits that they felt to be “high impact” (however they defined the term)¹⁰, and there are also indications that concerns about how to best identify those organizations and evaluate their worthiness are holding back investment.¹¹

“I think there is a lot of capital locked up right now because of exactly that problem – that people just don’t feel like they know how to evaluate.”

– *high net worth individual cited in: I’m Not Rockefeller, Center for High Impact Philanthropy*

Impact Investors: Impact investors can be foundations, individual donors, or, depending on one’s definition or impact, any organization that makes investments. There is a subset of thinkers for whom the term “impact investing” is an example of all that is wrong in the definition debates:

“All organizations regardless of their aims and objectives have an impact, and so, for the non-initiated, impact isn’t and cannot be something unique to social purpose organizations or their investors....”

– *Jeremy Nicholls, SROI Network*

“Clearly, the latest buzz is about impact and who wouldn’t like that? I mean, after all, who would launch a strategy with a focus on being ineffectual? Incompetent investing just doesn’t have the same ring to it as impact investing. We want to do more than simply earn a financial return – we want to actually change the world, and so for better and in some ways worse, the word of the day is: impact!”

– *Sean Stannard Stockton*

Leaving aside the frustration, there are in fact lots of open questions regarding the definition of “impact” that “impact investors” are seeking. There is a prevailing assumption that it must be some kind of social good.

“Impact investing is investing to achieve both financial return and a positive impact on social problems.”

– *One of a number of diverse twitter responses to recent Calvert Foundation call for impact investing definitions*

In some cases, this impact is seen as a bonus, with a distinction made from a traditional investment (which nonetheless may include social goods such as employment and income earning potential for certain groups).

¹⁰ Bank of America and The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. The 2012 Bank of America Study of High Net Worth Philanthropy.

¹¹ Money for Good II found that better communication around results could lead to significant additional capital moving towards highly effective nonprofits. <http://www.guidestar.org/ViewCmsFile.aspx?ContentID=4038>

¹² “Defining Impact Investing.” Calvert Foundation Blog, August 13, 2013. <http://www.calvertfoundation.org/blog/428-defining-impact-investing>.

In others, a comparison is drawn to a traditional charitable donation, and the standards for anticipated impact are raised.¹³ There is also currently no consensus as to what kind of financial return an “impact investment” must yield to be considered as such.

Non-profits: Non-profits generally depend at least partially on foundations and individual donors for support, so it should not be surprising that they are attentive to donor definitions of impact. Donor definitions and non-profit definitions are intimately related; the way that grantees define their own impact informs how funders can define theirs, and the way that a funder wants to define their impact can inform a non-profit’s impact definition and assessment approach. Things get sticky, however, when different donors push different definitions, or when the definitions most useful to the non-profit are different from those of a key donor.

CHIP and the Wharton Social Impact Initiative recently interviewed four high-performing, well-resourced non-profits on the subject of impact assessment, performance management, and communication with funders around the distinctions, definitions, and best uses of each. Within this high-performing group, there is an understanding that their work supports big-picture, long-term impacts, but they felt that shorter-term, specific outcomes were more relevant to their needs, as they were immediately related and attributable to their work. The leaders of these non-profits felt that measuring outcomes provided the kind of feedback that they needed to manage their organization’s performance, while measuring impact delivered results that were (a) less reliable, due to the methodological issues inherent in measuring further along the value chain; and (b) less useful, in terms of immediate relevancy to the organization’s decision-making and activities.¹⁴

The same non-profits, however, described pressure from funders to measure and report all the way out to impact. While this tension is not solely a definitional issue, definitions are an underlying component; when funders and grantees are not aligned on exactly what they are trying to achieve and how they will monitor progress towards those achievements, it is difficult to align at other decision points throughout the engagement.

The Importance of Establishing Causality: Push the measurement or pull back the impact definition?¹⁵

For stakeholders who believe that understanding causal linkages is central to understanding impact, there are at least two directions to go. One is to attempt to extend the chain of attribution-- often at high cost, with imprecise or unreliable results. The other is to say that because attribution is so central to impact, and because it is difficult to measure, impact definition and/or assessment should be focused closer to what can actually be attributed. The first approach carries the risk of inefficient resource allocation, high opportunity costs, and unreliable results; the second carries the risk of missing big picture effects (positive or negative), and does not contribute to the evidence base around impact of a particular intervention. These downsides can be especially relevant for women and girls, as interventions that are not considered part of the women and girls space can nevertheless have important impacts on women and girls as a group; these impacts (positive or negative) will not be captured without deliberate efforts to measure impact for women and girls specifically.

¹³ Acumen Fund “Acumen Fund Concept Paper: The Best Available Charitable Option (BACO),” 2009. http://acumen.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/01/BACO%20Concept%20Paper_01.24.071.pdf.

¹⁴ The Center for High Impact Philanthropy and Wharton Social Impact Initiative. A Donor’s Guide: Working with Nonprofits to Measure Performance and Manage to Impact. Forthcoming.

¹⁵ See also Jason Saul, “The Dirty Little Secret About Measurement.” Mission Measurement Blog, March 22, 2010. http://missionmeasurement.com/ideas/blog_entry/the-dirty-little-secret-about-measurement1

As with the more technical group, attribution is central to the way these non-profits think about impact but the reasoning leads them to a different place. Rather than trying to extend the attribution chain all the way out to impact, the impact focus shifts to where the chain of attribution ends. Outputs and outcomes are directly affected by the organization's activities, and focusing measurement efforts on those components therefore returns data that can directly inform their organizational decisions.

4. MISSING DEFINITIONS: THE BENEFICIARY PERSPECTIVE

"My life is not to be somebody else's impact – you know what I mean?"

– Alice Walker, novelist, author of *The Color Purple*

"[Beneficiaries] aren't buying your service; rather a third party is paying you to provide it to them. Hence the focus shifts more toward the requirements of who is paying versus the unmet needs and aspirations of those meant to benefit."

– Daniel Stid, *Bridgespan*

Many social programs operate with a top-down approach; socioeconomic data indicate a need in a certain population, or a donor has a particular connection to a topic. Funders provide resources to non-profits, who implement a program designed to address the original need; they may also collect data to demonstrate how well their program is alleviating that need—and that may lead to an understanding of that program's impact. But what if the target population would actually identify their need differently? Is it still

impact, in any sense beyond the technical definition?

The market dynamics of philanthropy encourage this top-down approach. Funders—whether individual or institutional—are in some sense the “customers” for the services of non-profits, even though they are not the ultimate consumers.

It has been noted that beneficiaries are often left out of the impact measurement process; this may be due in part to a growing focus on externally verifiable metrics, such as income, that can be more easily captured and assessed for statistical significance.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ While this is an important issue, the question of impact definition in some ways precedes it. Inclusion of beneficiaries in the *definition* of impact will naturally lead to an inclusion in the measurement approach. Conversely, leaving beneficiaries out of the definition process makes exclusion from measurement logical—once your desired impact is defined, there is usually little benefit to measuring indicators that are not directly related.

Some suggest that even the idea of “impact” inherently infers a power imbalance. Impact is active, implying a passive counterpart—the donor or organization is acting, while the beneficiary is being acted upon. It is important to note that even in this discussion, we are still relying on “experts” discussing beneficiaries, rather than direct reports from beneficiaries themselves.¹⁹ The scarcity of resources reporting directly from beneficiaries demonstrates the gap in opportunities for direct communication. This absence of voice, and the accompanying issues of power dynamics, are central to the gender lens discussion in the following section.

¹⁶ Twersky, Buchanan, and Threlfall. “Listening to Those Who Matter Most.”

¹⁷ Mario Morino, *Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes In an Era of Scarcity*. First Edition. Venture Philanthropy Partners, 2011.

¹⁸ Liz Allen, “Opinion: Measure for Measuring’s Sake?” Wellcome Trust Blog, January 31, 2013. <http://blog.wellcome.ac.uk/2013/01/31/opinion-measure-for-measurings-sake/>.

¹⁹ Drawn from Fay Twersky, Phil Buchanan, Valerie Threlfall, Jeremy Nicholls, Daniel Stid, Rosalind Eyban, and others.

5. BRINGING A GENDER LENS TO IMPACT DEFINITIONS

The liveliness of the impact discussion is partly a function of increasing pressure for interventions to demonstrate value, often quantitatively—getting impact definitions right, in many cases, corresponds to getting dollars. Assumptions about impact therefore have direct implications for the women and girls space.

The feminist evaluation literature suggests that traditional approaches to impact fall short in several key areas.²⁰ In this section, we pick up five themes coursing through the previous discussion of impact definitions and examine them more closely through a gender lens. They are: 1) the issue of attribution, or causality; 2) measurability; 3) the tendency to define impact positively; 4) how the issue of time plays into impact definition; and 5) the question of who defines impact.

From attribution to contribution: As noted in earlier sections, concepts of attribution and causality are central to definitions of impact for many in the field of impact research. Much of the work in the women and girls space is about building collective impact to reach a critical mass. The end goal may in fact be measurable and quantifiable in some respect (for instance, the passage of a land rights bill) but the extent to which any one organization or program contributed to that outcome may be unknowable, or at least difficult to measure quantitatively.

Illustrating this principle as it relates to political advocacy, Paul Brest gives the example of a group of people pushing a boulder up a hill. It's easy to see when the group has succeeded in reaching the top of

the hill, but no one person can know how much they contributed—or even whether they were necessary to achieve the outcome.²¹ Organizations involved in this kind of effort may have difficulty communicating the value of their work to audiences more focused on identifying directly attributable outcomes. On the other hand, the notion of collective impact, and the idea of many parts contributing to something larger than the sum, may appeal to others.²²

Measurability: While much of the current debate around impact and measurement issues is beyond the scope of this paper, there are important ways in which measurement can inform impact definition, rather than an impact definition driving measurement choices. A bias toward quantification may bias definitions of impact toward more easily quantifiable goals: for instance, increasing income among female earners rather than increasing the status of women in society.²³

Beyond the issues around measuring shared contribution and bias toward more easily quantifiable goals, there is mistrust around measurement in the gender in development literature because the impact of a wide variety of programs on women and girls has so frequently been overlooked. If beneficiary voices are almost never present in impact definitions, women and girls' experiences often never even make it into impact assessment. All results for beneficiaries are assumed to be the same, and women and girls are effectively invisible.

There is in fact ample evidence that program effects for women and girls are not the same as they are for men and boys. For example, in many coun-

²⁰ This section draws from the literature on gender in development (Srilatha Batliwala, Alexandra Pittman, Aruna Rao, David Kelaher, and others) as well as materials from foundations and groups serving women and girls specifically (Global Fund for Women, International Network of Women's Funds, Women's Funding Network, etc.)

²¹ Paul Brest, "Risky Business." Stanford Social Innovation Review, Summer 2012. http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/risky_business_2.

²² For examples of current work around collective impact measurement, see Faye Hanleybrown, "Shared Measurement for Collective Impact." FSG Social Impact Blog, September 14, 2011. <http://www.fsg.org/KnowledgeExchange/Blogs/SocialImpact/PostID/166.aspx>. and resources collected in this piece from John Kania and Mark Kramer. "Collective Impact." Stanford Social Innovation Review, Winter 2011, http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact.

²³ The RobinHood foundation approach to grant-making, for example, equates impact across different kinds of programs to the expected income and earning gains of program beneficiaries.

tries, girls and women bear primary responsibility for obtaining water. Installing an improved water and sanitation system may improve primary health indicators for all, but it also affects women and girls' time (usually positively) and freedom (sometimes negatively, as the time spent travelling to the water source is often spent with friends and peers, away from the directives of other members of the family). The point is you don't know if you don't measure.

While one response to these past omissions is to be wary of measurement and quantification, the other is to embrace it, insisting that any effort to define and assess impact across all sectors must include a gender lens. For advocates of the latter approach, this is not just a "women and girls" issue, but is rather the way that development needs to think about interventions in order to do more good than harm.

Time horizon bias: Impact definition and assessment in the women and girls arena is also frequently subject to a temporal bias. Evaluations are most often grant-funded—whether as part of a program budget or as a distinct initiative—and as such are subject to the same limitations of many other grants. In particular, the vast majority of grants are time-limited; for evaluation, this means that investigators have a certain number of years to collect data, and those data will ideally demonstrate the extent to which a given program has achieved impact. However, important initiatives for women and girls often work towards structural shifts in society; these are big, amorphous goals that are difficult to capture in a typical 2-, 3- or 5-year evaluation cycle. To take the example of the suffragettes, gaining the vote was a decades-long process; had there been a typical 5- or even 10-year impact evaluation conducted in the midst of that movement, it likely would not have captured a great deal of progress. Again, setting interim outcome goals without losing track of one's ultimate objective (impact sought) may be one way of compensating for temporal bias.

Tendency to define impact as positive: As seen in the previous discussion, in many if not most definitions of impact, positive change is assumed as the ultimate goal; language around progress and gaining is common. An observed change is the foundation of attribution—the change is what is attributed--and the status quo (lack of change) is the default. Advocates for gender-lensed evaluation point out that

"When you work for women's interests, it's two steps forward – if you're really smart and very lucky! – and at least one step back. In fact, it's often two or three steps back! And those steps back are, ironically, often evidence of your effectiveness; because they represent the threat you have posed to the power structure and its attempt to push you back. Sometimes, even your 'success stories' are nothing more than ways the power structure is trying to accommodate and contain the threat of more fundamental change by making small concessions."

– Sheela Patel, SPARC India²⁵

this assumption can be problematic for the women and girls sector, where positive impact may simply be holding the line.²⁴ For instance, keeping a women's health clinic open despite organized opposition may be evidence of effective work, but a positive change-focused approach would not capture that benefit.

Impact can even be negative; when work is challenging power structures, there may be a backlash in the face of progress. This would traditionally be taken as evidence that an intervention isn't working, but may in fact be the opposite:

This problem can be addressed in part by choosing an appropriate counterfactual, taking the overall landscape into account. If the counterfactual is a movement away from the desired outcome, an intervention that holds the line will demon-

²⁴ Srilatha Batliwala and Alexandra Pittman. Capturing Change in Women's Realities: A Critical Overview of Current Monitoring & Evaluation Frameworks. AWID Women's Rights, June 2010.

²⁵ Batliwala, Pittman. Capturing Change in Women's Realities.

strate value. A gender-lensed approach to evaluation will assess the context around an intervention *before* assuming that impact will be an observable change and assigning a counterfactual accordingly.

Who defines impact? As noted earlier, beneficiaries are often left out of the impact conversation. This omission is particularly problematic for populations of women and girls who have historically had little opportunity to voice their needs. Perpetuating that dynamic may have negative effects apart from or alongside other, positive impact. Additionally, even “positive” impact may miss the mark if it is not defined with input from the target population. For example, Helen Gichohi, speaking about an intervention to support women entrepreneurs in Kenya, noted that the conversations during the planning process were all about supporting collectives of female entrepreneurs; nobody thought to consider whether or not women might want to go into business on their own, as single business owners.²⁶ Ultimately, getting impact definitions “right” includes representing the voices of a group that has historically been voiceless: actively seeking out those voices will lead to more responsible and respectful work overall.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As illustrated in the preceding pages, impact does not mean the same thing for every person or organization in philanthropy and international development. In other words, “what we talk about when we talk about impact” depends on who is talking—and who is listening!

This confusion can be problematic: for example, in impact investing, uniform guidelines might release more capital, but the noise around impact definition makes it difficult to arrive at such a consensus; for non-profits, juggling conflicting donor definitions requires time and resources when both may be limited. In particular, the confusion around

impact has given rise to additional common misconceptions, and these misconceptions contribute to much of the gender bias in impact thinking.

First, there is a perception that impact is always change—and secondly, that the change is always positive. Neither of these ideas hold true in every circumstance, particularly for interventions relating to women and girls, where “holding the line” (perhaps preventing the passage of a restrictive law) may represent an enormous accomplishment. Defining impact as positive change will undervalue the contributions of many effective organizations working on hard problems or under difficult conditions.

A third common misconception is that there are some impacts that simply can’t be measured; this stems in part from a fourth misconception, which is that impact must be attributed to a particular actor or action. In reality, some impacts—such as a change in attitudes towards women—are very difficult or perhaps impossible to attribute to specific causes, but *the impact itself can still be measured, even without a clear causal attribution*. This is especially relevant for the transformative social change that many in the women and girls space seek; these large-scale, systemic shifts can rarely be attributed to a single group or intervention, but they are visible and measurable nonetheless. Defining impact as attributable change can exclude work done as a component of collective efforts, perpetuating the idea that those efforts are outside the realm of the impact-focused donor.

With all of these considerations in mind, it is clear that there is no one “right” or common definition of impact for every person in every situation. Good definitions are inclusive, but above all they are useful in clarifying a path to action. In that spirit, we offer three questions for the impact-focused donor to ask throughout their philanthropic engagement:

1. What difference do I want to make? By asking this question, a donor can take the

²⁶ Pioneers Post TV. Gazing Through the Gender Lens with Helen Gichohi, 2013. <http://www.pioneerspost.com/pp-tv/20130809/gazing-through-the-gender-lens-helen-gichohi>.

first step towards defining their own desired impact clearly, openly, and deliberately.

2. Is that difference meaningful to the population I hope to serve? In other words, does my definition of impact align with others', particularly those I hope to help? This can be a difficult question to answer, and a full discussion of possible methods is beyond the scope of this paper. Personal engagement with beneficiaries is valuable for many reasons, including the opportunity to hear on-the-ground perspectives on impact.

For many donors, the bulk of their philanthropic dollars flow through intermediary organizations. Broadly speaking, these organizations can incorporate beneficiary perspectives via: (1) a specific focus on women and girls, (2) representation from beneficiary groups in their leadership structures, and (3) impact assessments that evaluate impact on women and girls specifically, ideally using an approach that allows for participation from the populations served.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but may provide a starting point for the donor looking to bring a bottom-up approach to their impact definitions.

3. How will I know if I—or we—are moving closer to making that difference? With this question, a donor can make deliberate decisions to guide their measurement approach in a way that reflects their desired impact: is attribution important? Are effects on women and girls addressed specifically, with enough flexibility to capture positive, negative, or neutral impacts? What is the expected timeframe?

These three questions offer concrete ways to incorporate impact thinking into philanthropic decision-making, giving donors more confidence to invest in interventions that benefit women and girls in a range of ways. It is our hope that by outlining different ways of thinking about impact, all actors in the space—researchers, donors, non-profits and beneficiaries—may have clearer and more rewarding conversations that, in turn, may lead to more money doing more good.

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