

IPL GUIDE 1

Impact Planning and Learning



Impact Planning and Learning - an overview

An overview of Keystone's Impact Planning
and Learning methodology and description of the
facilitation service that Keystone offers

June 2008

The complete IPL tool suite

Keystone has developed IPL for organizations seeking to improve the way that they can contribute to significant and lasting change.

The present guide is part of the IPL tool suite that helps organizations create a framework for developing strategies, building partnerships, planning interventions, gathering evidence of success or failure and, most importantly, analyzing and learning from this evidence through open generative dialogue among constituents and stakeholders who have a real interest in change.

1. IPL - An overview and service offering

- 1.1 The overview
- 1.2 The Keystone service offering

2. Developing a theory of change

A guide to developing a theory of change as a framework for inclusive dialogue, learning and accountability for social impact.

- 2.1 Imagining success
- 2.2 Pathways to outcomes
- 2.3 Becoming eco-intelligent
- 2.4 From theory to strategy

3. Learning with constituents

A guide to identifying, documenting and analyzing evidence of impact (planned or unplanned), and learning from this in dialogue with constituents.

Introduction to evidence and dialogue

- 3.1 Whose voices matter? - mapping constituents and stakeholders
- 3.2 Gathering and documenting evidence of impact - journals of change
- 3.3 Gathering and documenting evidence of impact - dialogue methods
- 3.4 Gathering and documenting evidence of impact - Feedback surveys

4. Validated impact reporting

A guide to communicating your effectiveness and your learning through public, constituency-validated reports.

5. Capabilities profiler

A guide to help organizations and their constituents assess and profile their potential to effectively bring about sustainable social change.

Impact Planning and Learning – an overview

Keystone's **Impact Planning and Learning** method (IPL) helps social purpose organizations to plan, monitor, evaluate and communicate their work in a way that is deeply sensitive to the complexity of social systems and change processes. IPL focuses on the contribution organizations make to achieving sustainable developmental outcomes in complex systems. It fosters accountable learning relationships among key constituents of change processes (funders, implementers and those most affected) in which each learns to contribute optimally to incremental and sustainable impact over time.

Defining impact

In the language of development, the word *impact* is used in many different and confusing ways! The logical framework people did us a great disservice when they robbed the word of its everyday meaning and turned it into a jargon term meaning exclusively long-term, sustainable and system-wide change. Used in this sense it is impossible for us to plan for or know whether we are having any impact at all.

It is time that we take back the word and restore its everyday meaning which everyone understands. In its everyday sense, our impact is simply our contribution to any meaningful and lasting change or *outcome*.

Impact can be short term and specific, such as helping community leaders acquire new skills. It can be incremental, such as when new skills help people to establish effective community-based institutions. And specific impacts can combine with the impact of others to generate long term sustainable and system-wide impact such as more accountable relationships and effective partnerships between government and communities.

But a simple definition does not mean that the process of generating impact is simple. We all know that lasting social change involves many actors working in many different ways at different levels in organizations and institutions. Change is often uncertain and unpredictable, and our impact can be positive or negative – and sometimes both together.

A theory of change

If we are serious about social impact, the first thing that we need to do is clarify and make explicit our assumptions about *how change happens* in our context. We need a clear picture of what success looks like, and what we think are the necessary preconditions for achieving and sustaining success. In other words, we need to clarify and make explicit our theory of change.

There are two dimensions to a theory of change.

- Identifying *what* we think needs to happen to achieve and sustain the changes, or *outcomes*, that we want to see. We call this mapping the **outcome pathways** to success.
- Identifying *who* (people or institutions) we think can influence these outcomes positively or negatively. We call this mapping the **activity ecosystem**.

From theory to strategy

With a comprehensive theory of change in place, we can work out the ways in which we think we can (alone and with others) contribute most effectively to achieve the specific impacts we desire. And we have a set of outcome indicators that we can use to measure our progress in bringing this impact about.

This is where simple logic models can be very useful – to design specific short-term strategies where the inputs, activities and objectives can be clearly defined within the overall framework of a theory of change.

The more our theory of change and our strategies are understood and shared by the other constituents of our interventions, the easier it is to work together in a systematic way to achieve impacts that matter to all – especially those most affected by what we do.

Learning with constituents

As we implement our strategies, we need to constantly reflect on what impact we are having. We need ways of recognizing and documenting evidence of our success or failure. And we need to be learning how we can do things better.

Some changes we can measure quantitatively, with numbers. These can be short-term changes such as an increase in the number of young people who say they are practicing safer sex. Or they can be longer term such as a sustained decrease in the number of deaths related to HIV infection. But numbers alone seldom tell us why these changes occurred or how we may have contributed to bringing them about.

To really understand the impact that we are making, we need to be especially sensitive to qualitative feedback from our constituents. Feedback can take many forms – a word dropped in conversation, a change in levels of cooperation, a formal letter of praise or complaint, even silence can mean a lot – like if you organize an activity and no one comes.

The trick is how to gather and document meaningful feedback in ways that do not impose a huge burden on staff. The IPL guide **Learning from Constituents** discusses different options including:

- *Change journals* in which staff record the informal feedback and changes that they observe in their daily work,

- Various *structured dialogue techniques* such as focus groups, world café, and others which probe deeply into what small groups of people think and feel about what the organization is achieving.
- Large scale feedback techniques such as *surveys* that generate detailed feedback from large numbers of people on many specific aspects of the organization's behaviour and performance. Survey results are an excellent way to stimulate deeper learning dialogues.

The way we communicate with and respond to our constituents and other stakeholders greatly affects the quality of our relationships, the quality of our learning, and ultimately our effectiveness. IPL fosters the craft of dialogue among constituents – in clarifying their theory of change, in planning strategies and in learning – as a powerful way of generating confidence and trust, stimulating new and creative thinking, and promoting effective collaboration and partnerships as well as learning and improving.

Public reporting

The final piece of the IPL puzzle is a new approach to reporting that focuses on the organization's contribution to outcomes and honestly reflects its learning through the voices of its constituents. This kind of reporting is an integral part of the organization's learning process.

One dimension of reporting is the formal report back to constituents and other stakeholders against your theory of change and your strategic goals. In the IPL system, formal reports should focus on your contribution to outcomes as reflected by the evidence you have gathered and the feedback you have received. Reports should be engaging public documents – in other words written in a lively accessible style for all constituents and stakeholders, and not simply to account to funders. Reports should stimulate inclusive dialogue on the conclusions and the way forward.

This kind of constituency validated impact reporting demonstrates legitimacy and impact in a credible and authentic way.

We recognise that many current funder-grantee relationships discourage this kind of openness and honesty. So Keystone also works with grantmakers encouraging them to see themselves as co-constituents of the change process and learning partners whose policies and practices can greatly influence the impact of their grantees.

But reporting also includes all the ways in which you communicate your work through publications, web site, press articles, presentations and meetings etc. In public communication as in formal reporting, we feel that the same focus on impact and learning and public validation through constituency voice should apply.

Keystone's approach and service offering

In addition to the IPL tool suite, which is free to use,¹ Keystone offers facilitation services to help organizations develop their own impact planning and learning system.

Typically, this consists of the initial facilitation of the key elements of the IPL system followed by ongoing support and advice as required. The amount of time this takes depends on the change readiness and capacity of the organization to creatively adapt and design a system that they can own and operate themselves.

Keystone's preferred approach is light touch – providing just the amount of support that the organization needs to develop the capacity to work on its own. We see this as more than a one-way provider-client relationship. Keystone is on hand to provide ongoing support, and encourages clients to join an informal community of practice in which members support each other by sharing their experiences, ideas and adaptations.

To illustrate what this service offering looks like and the time and cost implications, we include a general description below. However, this description is for illustration purposes only. Keystone will engage with potential clients to find out what their current systems look like, and how the offering might be tailored to their needs and budget.

The elements of an IPL system can be introduced incrementally over time as staff and stakeholders take time to get things right.

Introducing the elements of an impact planning and learning framework

1. A clearly articulated theory of change

The first step is to help the organization clarify its **theory of change**.

This is much more than simply clarifying the logic that underpins its existing strategies. It requires participants to think beyond what they do now. Once developed, a theory of change provides a comprehensive outcome-based learning framework through which an organization can examine its strategies in a new way and assess what, if any, changes should be made going forward. It supports greater synergies across organizational functions and fosters a more integrated approach to strategy development going forward.

A theory of change derives from a specific and clearly stated vision of success and maps out pathways of intermediate outcomes that are seen as necessary preconditions for success. It also

¹ The complete IPL tool suite is available from www.KeystoneAccountability.org/tools

maps the activity eco-system in order to identify other actors (individuals or institutions) who can influence the desired outcomes positively or negatively.

The pathways to outcomes map provides a framework of achievable intermediate outcomes around which the organization can design **direct strategies** (aimed at achieving outcomes directly) and **lateral strategies** aimed at influencing other actors in the eco-system and developing effective collaborative networks and partnerships for change.

A theory of change activity typically begins with a two day facilitated workshop with managers and programme staff from the organization sometimes supported by key external stakeholders². If necessary, this can be shortened to a one day initial workshop with all participants followed by a second day with a core management group.

Post-workshop, the draft outcome pathways and eco-system maps are refined into a clearly written and comprehensive outcome pathways map, and a shorter narrative statement of the theory of change.

Keystone time usually involves a day pre-planning, the two workshop days and from 1-3 days post workshop refinement depending on whether the organization wants Keystone to produce the final documentation in consultation with staff or to play a more supervisory and support role to staff who do it themselves.

Deliverable: A comprehensive Theory of Change in the form of detailed maps of the ecosystem and outcome pathways as well as a shorter narrative summary.

2. A correlated set of ‘proximate and incremental’ project level indicators

The proximate and incremental indicators of success generated by the theory of change assist in planning, monitoring and reflecting on performance. **Proximate indicators of success** are outcomes that the organization can plausibly expect to influence in a meaningful way. Often they focus on changes in conditions, attitudes, behaviours, relationships and capabilities of individual actors, groups or institutions. They are also **incremental** in the sense that achieving short term and intermediate outcomes can be shown to contribute to long term sustainable change.

There are two main kinds of indicators:

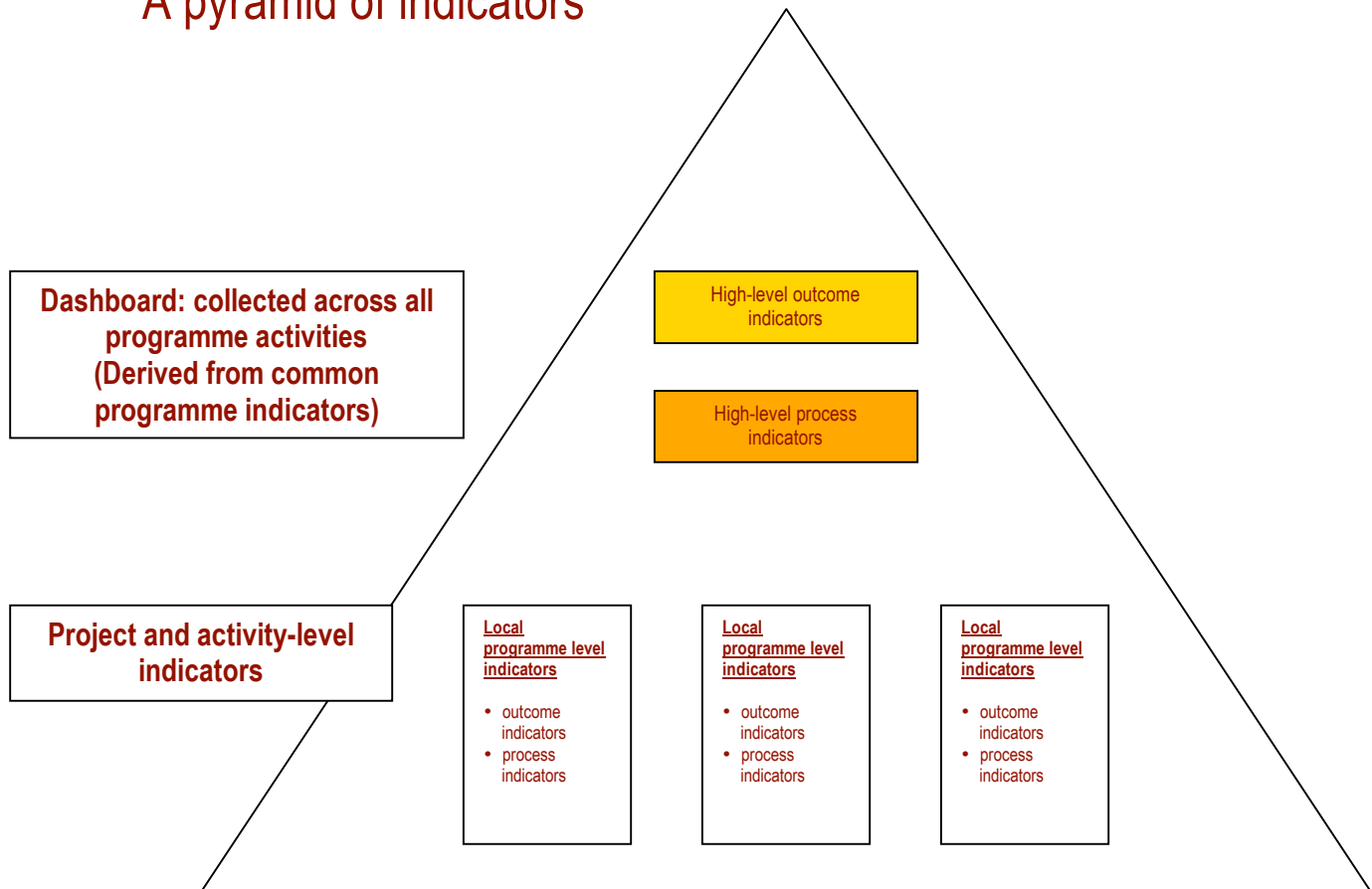
- Short term **process indicators** to measure progress towards intermediate outcomes.
- **Outcome or impact indicators** to measure contribution to specific desired outcomes.

² We recommend that the initial workshop consists of key program staff, senior management, active members of board and one or two key external stakeholders who may have expert knowledge to contribute or who may be involved in the implementation. The feedback of other constituents on the theory of change and strategies can be incorporated over time.

In an organization with different workstreams, it is also advisable to develop two levels of indicators:

- **Dashboard-level indicators:** a small set of top-level indicators (2-4) that signal progress towards the main goal, and are collected systematically across all functions and programme activities.
- **Project and activity-level indicators:** a pool of incremental indicators collected uniquely by specific projects and in each of the countries or regions where the project is present.

A pyramid of indicators



This set of activities refines the outcome pathways of the theory of change and generates a correlated set of process and outcome indicators at Dashboard level (for the organization as a whole) and at the level of the specific programme or project functions.

This can be done through a facilitated process with a small management group and then shared with other key stakeholders for feedback. Keystone time is dependent on how much the organization is able to do itself – usually between one and two days.

Deliverable: A pyramid of indicators

3. A data collection and tracking system for learning from and with constituents

Collecting evidence of success (or lack of success) against the indicators and your theory of change should happen in two main ways:

Lasting social change is usually a complex process – and to track it meaningfully requires gathering many different forms of feedback and other evidence of success or failure.

1. As a relatively **informal ongoing process** of observation and recording involving everyone in the organization as well as key constituents and other stakeholders. Once they are aware of what to look for, people notice things differently and can record different forms of feedback (from formal communications like letters to informal conversations and even silent feedback such as avoidance).
2. As formal and **specific data collection activities** such as surveys, focus group discussions, dialogues etc.

All learning does require time and effort. But it is essential that the value generated by the learning should make the investment of time and effort worthwhile. No data should be collected for its own sake – and you should focus on only a few significant indicators that provide useful information. Keystone will propose systems for the collection of such data by the organization as part of its ordinary work that are manageable and cost-effective in terms of time, effort and money.

- Ongoing data collection: outcome journals, impact ledgers, evaluation forms from various activities, etc. that help to construct a baseline description of key data points according to the selected indicators of success, and then help track changes going forward.
- Occasional feedback surveys for collecting detailed feedback on specific aspects of work from large numbers of constituents
- Formal reflection and dialogue activities – focus groups etc.

Periodic surveys of key stakeholder perceptions can provide useful factual as well as relationship data on specific issues from a large number of respondents. Keystone has developed a model for anonymous comparative constituency feedback that is proving a powerful learning tool providing valuable new insights as well as stimulating fruitful dialogue among constituents that would not happen otherwise.

- It provides new insights about the impact on the lives of those affected and can inform strategic reviews
- It empowers constituents by amplifying their voice and helps build confidence, trust and legitimacy.

Keystone offers

- Advice on the constitution of the survey cohort and the identification of stakeholder groups to be surveyed.
- Advice on the design of survey questionnaires consisting of a mix of standardised and custom questions suited to the stage and nature of the relationship.
- The optimal mix of survey methods (interviews, email, postal etc.) is decided after one or two trial surveys.
- The report back process creates wonderful opportunities to dig deeper into issues raised by the survey results, and repeat surveys over time indicate comparative success over time and across sectors and regions.
- Survey data from a number of surveys can be aggregated and analysed for programme and sectoral trends.

Understanding how key constituents experience an organization across a range of dimensions is beneficial in various respects:

- It provides new insight about the impact of the project on beneficiaries and other constituents and can inform the organization's assessments of its efforts and help it to refine its strategies.
- It informs the organization's understanding of important, new aspects of its performance
- It empowers constituents by amplifying their voice. The process gives constituents a new opportunity to participate in the organization and increase their sense of stake in the organization's work.
- It helps the organization grow in legitimacy.

This deliverable flows out of the previous one. If requested, Keystone will work with the management group to propose a cost- and effort-effective data collection and tracking system. Time required to support the general design of the system is approximately 1-2 days over a number of weeks.

Surveys and specific implementation of elements of the system are costed separately and depend on the extent and time required.

Deliverable: Overall data collection system specifying change journal formats, data gathering templates, guidelines, sample questionnaires etc.

From theory to strategy

Having created a clear and coherent impact planning and learning framework, it is now possible to move from theory to specific strategy development.

The first step is to identify specific outcomes in the theory of change that the organization can plausibly influence and design operational plans with specific objectives that relate to the theory of change. The organization can focus on achieving the necessary preconditions for success that it has identified in its outcome pathways.

This strategy can be a flexible but coherent mix of short term specific campaigns or projects as well as longer term strategic interventions – either acting directly on its own or in collaboration with others. These plans can be elaborated using simple logic models that describe the inputs, capacity and institutional development, activities and outputs required to achieve specific objectives. Success is measured by identifying specific indicators that relate to the theory of change.

This is best achieved in a facilitated planning workshop with a core group of programme staff and decision makers – but could usefully include staff from other programme areas (to ensure synergies) and relevant external experts. Time required is one workshop day and up to one further day of direct assistance or more remote support depending on requirements.

Deliverable: A coherent set of operational plans framed by the theory of change.

Reflective dialogue and learning

Information on its own is useless unless the organization reflects with its constituents and other stakeholders on what it means and what each can do about it. Documenting change needs to be followed by inclusive dialogue and reflection involving different constituents and perspectives. Through reflective dialogue people can generate new knowledge and understanding. It helps the organization understand what is working, why it is working, what must be sustained and what must be changed. It also helps identify opportunities quickly and see problems before they become too large.

Reflective dialogue is recognised as a powerfully generative process often stimulating a new creative energy and a 'collective intelligence' as participants consciously listen to others and allow the words and ideas to integrate with their own. It generates new collaborative relationships and ways of working together.

Keystone recommends that the first dialogues with stakeholders take the form of an appreciative reflection on historical successes and on the theory of change and strategy. This builds synergies and a sense of empowerment, energy and involvement. Over time, a wide range of different dialogue techniques can be applied to generate new knowledge about impacts, new strategic directions and new collaborative relationships. There is a growing network of dialogue practitioners in the world, and Keystone can guide the organization in the techniques and methods best suited to purpose and context.

Keystone can facilitate an initial mapping of constituents and stakeholders, and the design of a stakeholder dialogue strategy. This would involve approximately one day – half in a workshop and half refining the engagement strategy.

If the organization requires any further support or training in conducting learning dialogues, this can be arranged on an ad hoc basis. Keystone is available to provide ongoing advice and support as needed.

5. Reporting

The final piece of the puzzle is the design of a new approach and method of reporting, which needs to be thought about in two dimensions. One dimension involves *reporting back* to different stakeholders on the basis of an agreed framework, for example, to donors on the basis of agreed grant reporting requirements, or to partners on the basis of agreed indicators of success. The other dimension is public reporting – the totality of the communications that the organization puts out to society at large through its website or printed organizational reports.

Keystone believes that both forms of reporting should go far beyond the current norm that generally consists of self-reported, unverified information that typically reflects only positive outputs and results. Reporting should become an integral part of the learning process.

As such, it should be public – in other words written for an inclusive audience of constituents and stakeholders, and not simply to account to donors. It should reflect the views and perspectives of constituents and it should focus on the impacts that the organization has made – short term and intermediate, intended and unintended, positive and negative – as documented in different ways and as perceived by a range of constituents.

This kind of constituency validated impact reporting demonstrates legitimacy and impact in a credible and authentic way. Keystone can provide examples and guidelines at the appropriate time.

If the organization has been rigorous and inclusive in its theory of change, documentation and reflective action learning, its ongoing learning will flow naturally into this kind of annual public reporting.

There should be little need for much further facilitation beyond the initial design of a reporting format and model. This would involve perhaps one day of short facilitated sessions – but Keystone is there to provide support if needed.

Deliverable: Customised public reporting model.

A rough costing for the initial facilitation

Item	Unit	Time frame	No of days	Sub-total
Clarify Theory of Change	Initial 2 day workshop			
	Follow up and refinement of Theory of Change			
A correlated set of local project or program level indicators	Half day workshop plus further half day			
A coherent set of operational plans for 2008/9.	Initial one day workshop plus up to two further days			
Design ongoing monitoring and data collection procedures including periodic constituency feedback activities	1 – 2 days as required			
Ongoing support	As required			
Total 8 – 11 days				