

Lessons from civil society: how a ‘Theory of Change’ can help tell a bigger impact story.

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*As academics think about impact, they can draw on some of the lessons and strategic approaches used by civil society and campaigning groups. **Andy Martin**, Director of strategy consulting firm Firetail, says academics should ask themselves three questions when thinking about the impact of their research to help form a broader understanding of how their work operates beyond reductive measurables.*



Most charities, NGOs and other civil society organisations are set up to change something. Achieving some kind of ‘impact’ is almost always the reason for their existence. In our experience we’ve learned that it’s hard to change the world, that measuring progress is complex, and it’s even more difficult to attribute the change you see to the work that you’ve done. ‘Impact’, especially in the worlds of politics, policy, advocacy and communications can be opaque. Yet, organisations campaigning for change recognise that they need to understand their impact as best they can.

Academics are faced with similar challenges. This may be because they are accountable to their funders, or because they are keen to understand how to maximise their impact. In academia, as in civil society, it’s critical to understand that impact isn’t just something that emerges from good work, but is something to plan for. Impact is not just a function of research excellence. It requires a new set of skills, capabilities and relationships.

To understand impact, both charities and academics need a clear view of how their work will lead to the change they want to see. To start thinking about this, there are three questions that a campaigner would ask, and that an academic thinking about impact can also use:

1. How does change happen?
2. Where does change happen?
3. What’s my role in making change happen?

These questions are part of a ‘theory of change’ approach, which many organisations use to plan their work. A good theory of change will be iterative, and revisited to reflect what works, what doesn’t work, which assumptions were inaccurate and what needs to change. This approach isn’t about turning academics into advocates; it’s about looking at how research can have an impact, and what the causal chain of impact might look like.

1. How does change happen?

If you have a desired outcome in mind, think about the potential activities that logically map to that outcome. This mapping should be based on your view of how change happens and will, at first, be based on assumptions and imperfect information.

For example, if a charity’s ultimate goal is to engage more children in sports as a means to improve academic performance, there are a number of possible actions that it might take. One approach may be to engage in policy advocacy on the topic, another might be delivering a sports programme, a third option is to educate parents on the benefits of sports on academic performance. Each of these options has different actions associated with it, and each would have a distinct set of causal links that would likely make some progress towards the ultimate goal.

2. Where does change happen?

Looking at the landscape is a key part of any theory of change, and it can help contextualise why certain activities are successful and why others are ignored. Any landscape in which you might seek to have impact will be competitive. Those with the best solution, or the right answer, can lose out to those who are better at talking to their audience. Good civil society organisations prioritise the recipients of their output. They think about who (for want of a better word), the ‘customers’ of their work are. This might be the people reading policy research, the audience of their advocacy work, or the recipients of programmes, or the general public.

We spend a lot of time helping our clients to think about their audiences and their environment. What does the political and environmental landscape look like? Who are your ‘customers’ already looking to for guidance? What are the messages you are competing with? How do these groups behave, and what will compel a change in behaviour? What are the constraints facing your ‘customers’? Who has the power to implement change? These questions are relevant to anyone looking to have an impact with policy and research questions.

Going back to our example of engaging more children in sports, let’s consider the context. There may be a scenario in which the political appetite for mandating more sports in schools is strong, it’s an issue that has popular appeal, and the economic conditions make it possible to implement. In this context, policymakers might be receptive, policy research work may be wildly successful, and an organisation might attribute their success to a job well done. The organisation might repeat their efforts for a different project under different circumstances. In a scenario where the conditions are unfavourable, the same quality inputs could have minimal results.

Haphazard work can have an impact in favourable conditions and impeccable work can fail due to tough circumstances. Separating how much of your impact is environmental is highly subjective, but essential to learning.

3. What is my role in making change happen?

Once they have a view on how change happens and the landscape for that change, strategic charities and NGOs plan their interventions to have maximum impact. Based on what they know, they ask themselves “What can we do to cause the change we want to see in the world?”

In our work with academics, we have seen simple changes in approach lead to greatly increased impact. It can be as simple as making sure the right officials see your work, or having a team deciding to focus on EU-level rather than national-level stakeholders. It might mean timing publications to coincide with major events, like the G8 or the reading of a bill in Parliament. A view of how audiences engage with research will lead some to publish briefings for politicians that are short and to the point, whilst research for officials is fully referenced and cited. Work for local decision-makers can be customised with local data. It often means developing a clear understanding of how the media landscape works, what it takes to be credible in that world, and how an academic’s work in the media connects to political change.

But without knowing how change happens, what the landscape and the audience looks like, and what your role could be, it’s difficult to be effective. Much of the current debate about ‘impact’ appears to focus on the identifiable, measurable and verifiable. This feels reductive, especially when the bigger picture often tells a more important story.

A ‘theory of change’ is a way of describing this bigger picture.

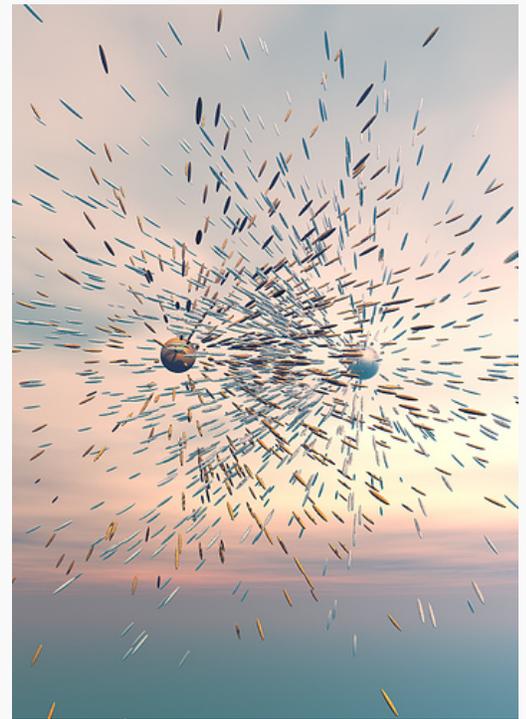


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Answering these three questions is a starting point for thinking about impact in a more strategic way. It's an approach that many civil society organisations use and find useful, and something academics are beginning to use to provide context and focus to their work.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Andy Martin is the Director of [Firetail](#), a strategy consulting firm that works with civil society organisations. Since founding Firetail he has worked as a senior advisor to leaders of charities, NGOs and social enterprises including Comic Relief, Oxfam, Anthony Nolan, World Vision, the Open Data Institute and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He was previously Head of Strategy at Cancer Research UK, the UK's largest charity and spent the early part of his career in commercial strategy consulting.

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