

Scaling a social innovation? Measure your impact with... the PICO Framework



This document is an extract from “Learning As You Scale: A practical guide for using data and insights to navigate scaling and complex system change”, a guide that was commissioned and supported by the Genio Trust in 2021.

The practical guide has been produced in consultation with actors within the social innovation arena from across Europe. These actors included Madeleine Clarke (Genio), John Healy (Genio), Niamh Lally (Genio), Grainne Smith (Genio), Dana Verbal (Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission), Risto Raivio (Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission), Henk Visser (Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission), Monika Chaba (Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission), Ruth Armstrong (National Social Inclusion Office, Health Service Executive, Ireland), Marieke Altena (National Social Inclusion Office, Health Service Executive, Ireland), David Stead (Maanch), Clémentine Blazy (European Centre for Social Finance & member of the ESCF Advisory Board), Bairbre Nic Aongusa (Irish Department of Rural and Community Development), Gary Johnston (Social Finance UK/NL), Maša Malovrh (Beletrina), Michael Fembek (Zero Project), Assiri Valdes (UpSocial), Ona Argemí (UpSocial), Anja Koenig (EVPA), Stephanie Haefele (Bosch-Stiftung), Luca Pilosu (Compagnia di San Paolo), Hannah Cooper (IDC), Carolina Gottardo (IDC) and Vivienne Chew (IDC). The authors would like to acknowledge their sincere appreciation of the input of time and expertise that these people contributed to the development of this resource.

About the Author

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His research focuses on social innovation, entrepreneurship, and impact measurement. He has worked in a number of multinational, EU-funded research projects. *Social Innovation: Comparative Perspectives*, which he co-wrote and edited, was awarded by the Academy of Management's (AOM) Public and Non-Profit Division. The MOOC "Accelerating Investment Readiness" (#AirMOOC) he lead-developed won a USASBE prize for potential impact on social entrepreneurs, investors and policy makers.

Gorgi has strong expertise in studying the process of social innovations (including their transfer and scaling) and measuring social impact. These competencies stem from his work in numerous EU-funded and national research projects (INNOSERV, TEPSIE, ITSSOIN, Finance4SocialChange, IndiSI) as well as his dissertation at the University of Oxford.

A word on impact measurement

The amount of impact measurement tools is vast, and their variety and concrete application have been well documented (see Avise, 2021; GECES Sub-group, 2014; European Commission & the OECD, 2015; Tuan, 2008). You may be aware of many others and you could choose to integrate those into your Learning As You Scale plan. Rather than repeating existing resources, we provide these three accessible tools and a number of strategic considerations that will help you decide which tools to use to measure impact.

It is well established that economic value creation may play a pronounced role in social innovations, which may therefore represent a substantial share of relevant key performance indicators (KPIs). Any activities that help prevent public transfers, such as work integration efforts, might be well covered and analysed with classic cost-benefit analyses that focus on how much the state has saved by the innovator succeeding to provide unemployed people with a job. However, as detailed in Section 1, it is essential to understand that a large share of social innovations will focus on the creation of other types of value or impact such as:

- **social** (questions about interpersonal relations and networks, people's lives etc.)
- **cultural** (questions about norms and values)
- **political** (questions about participation and engagement)
- **environmental** (questions about preserving our environment and limiting environmental degradation)

Assessing such effects demands a much higher degree of creativity and methodological complexity. There are a range of ways that this can be achieved. Social return on investment (SROI) methods is one approach that enables people to assess the value of their social innovations that are not usually assessed via traditional financial value measurement tools. However, this is not the only way of assessing the social, cultural and political value of social innovations and, as Section 4 explores, different decision-makers, gatekeepers and stakeholders can be influenced by different methods. Some will prefer more traditional data or quantitative evidence, whereas others are inclined to be persuaded by individual stories and data with richer qualitative details.

Since the Nobel Prize in Economics of 2019, experimental methods that make use of randomisation have been prominent. Such randomized controlled trials are perhaps viewed as the 'gold standard' for evidence and thus social innovators may assume that such methods should be what they use when measuring impact. However, it is important to note that while experimental methods, which are very resource-intensive, have their benefits in certain areas, they also have serious limitations.

Randomisation has its benefits when interventions represent 'easy fixes' to a problem, for example when a vaccination may prevent a disease. In such a case, the desired outcome or impact (higher immunization) equals or is close to the outputs produced (number of vaccinations performed). In instances like this, you can easily check the incidence of the disease in groups of people who received the vaccine versus groups that did not receive it in order to assess its effectiveness.

However, experimental methods are limited, if not unsuitable, for understanding multifaceted, organizational activities that seek to produce multifactorial changes. For many social innovations we will need detailed accounts of whether interventions enable new social relations, empowerment, or self-worth, or a combination of those effects. This requires contextual knowledge, from multiple data

sources, including qualitative information. This part of the toolbox will explore this more complex arenas in which social innovations are usually situated in more detail.

Let's talk about... measuring impact

Take a look at these short videos from Gorgi Krlev from Heidelberg University. In them, Gorgi explores how you can move from methods to a strategic approach to social impact measurement, and some of the challenges you can come across when measuring impact.

From method to strategy - Watch here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHD4_Z781r0

Challenges when measuring impact - Watch here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boJ8zgn3nOk>

Why is it useful to measure your impact?

It is important to stress that impact measurement is not an exercise that social innovators only do for their funders or policy makers. It should also be undertaken so that the insights can be used for organisational learning. As a learning tool, it is useful for:

1. **Gathering information:** It can inform the 'standard activities' of social innovators by being a useful means through which data about these activities is gathered and understood.
2. **Navigating the direction of innovations:** It can help assess and steer the scaling of social innovations because it helps establish links between performed activities and impacts achieved. It informs the planning of the process as well as the process itself.
3. **Answering key critical questions:** An effective impact measurement and reporting system provides answers to questions like:
 - Where did we not see the impact that we were aiming to create?
 - What were the reasons for the impact not materializing?
 - How do we need to improve our activities? Or alternatively, how do we need to redefine our goals to better align with our actual impacts?
 - What kinds of impacts have we achieved that we did not expect?
 - Is what we are doing producing the greatest possible impact, or do we need to develop an entirely new approach?

You may also want to consider exploring questions regarding stakeholders through your impact measurement strategy, particularly those outside of the innovation who may be vital to scaling the innovation. Examples of such critical questions could be:

- How far did our own impact expectations and performance align with those of our stakeholders? Which impact dimensions were missing or seemed redundant to our stakeholders?
- Which of the impacts produced (or not) were most material to our stakeholders? What does that mean for our organizational strategy?

The following tool - the PICO framework - is a useful way of gathering evidence of impact and data that can support learning processes. It can be used individually or in conjunction with other insight gathering methods not included in this guide.

The PICO Framework

When thinking about how to measure your impact, we suggest you break it down into three steps:

1. **Determining what impact to measure** - This step is about identifying the changes the social innovation is making and what is important to measure.
2. **Getting to an impact measurement design** - This step is about researching and determining what types of data and data processes would be useful for measuring impact.
3. **Putting measurement into practice** - This step is about planning how you activate an impact measurement process.

The descriptions below provide practical guides as to how you can apply these steps in your social innovation using the PICO framework (Participants, Intervention, Comparator, Outcomes). The PICO framework has been used widely in healthcare settings but is transferable to other areas and sectors. You can also use answers from Section 1 and the Value and impact mapping tool resource to help you.

Step 1: Determining what impact to measure

Description	This activity helps you to use the PICO framework to determine what kind of impact measurement is right for the social innovation.
Resource Level	Experience: Intermediate Time: 0.5 days - 1 day (research, discussion/reflection and compilation of results) Cost: Low
Materials	Desk-based research facilities, note-making materials Impact measurement - PICO template
Step-by-step guide	<p>The PICO method prompts analysts of impact to consider four questions on Participants, Intervention, Comparator and Outcomes.</p> <p>Step 1: Participants:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Who are the intended beneficiaries (direct or indirect) of the social innovation? b) Who are the core target groups? <p>Step 2: Intervention:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) What is it exactly that the social innovation does that is supposed to create effects for the target groups? (Tip: If you have a Theory of Change - or similar - it will help you answer this question). <p>Step 3: Comparator:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> b) What are our activities additional to?

	<p>c) What is the standard intervention? (Remark: your activities may be so new and innovative that there is nothing to compare it to)</p> <p>Step 4: Outcomes (also referred to as impacts):</p> <p>a) What main effects is the social innovation aiming to produce? These are the changes you are hoping to see as a result of the social innovation.</p> <p>Top Tip: Try to be as specific as possible when answering the questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In terms of participants, be specific in terms of age, gender, socio-economic status or other relevant characteristics. • When thinking about the intervention, be clear about the types and variety of activities you are delivering and the important elements in them. • Do not be too broad when thinking about outcomes, or the measurement may become unmanageable; listing too many desired outcomes may also indicate your strategy is unfocussed.
Templates	Impact measurement - PICO template

Step 2: Getting to an impact measurement design

Description	This activity helps you to decide what kind of data you will gather and how you will gather and analyse it.
Resource Level	<p>Experience: Intermediate</p> <p>Time: 1-2 days (research, discussion/reflection and compilation of results)</p> <p>Cost: Low</p>
Materials	<p>Desk-based research facilities, note-making materials</p> <p>PICO examples table</p> <p>PICO summary template</p>
Step-by-step guide	<p>Step 1: Analytic considerations:</p> <p>Look at the outcomes (or impacts) that you have identified via the PICO framework and reflect on what type of change is being created and how this change is best measured or evidenced, and what it can be compared to.</p> <p>There are many approaches to this and the Find out more: Which data should I use and how? call out box will help you with this thinking. You should identify whether quantitative or qualitative data (or both) is best for evidencing the impact of the social innovation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative data is data that can be quantified or counted, and is easier to measure. For example, a social innovation that aims to reduce drug and alcohol addiction in a specific location may choose to track hospital admissions in the area for reasons relating to drug and alcohol misuse and

compare them to similar periods prior to the social innovation to see if the innovation has helped to reduce admissions.

- Qualitative data focuses on data that is observed and can garner more nuanced insights into an activity. It covers areas that are not so easy to measure such as thoughts and feelings. For example, the drug and alcohol addiction support service may want to understand how people accessing the service felt about their treatment. This could be gathered by simple feedback cards or with storytelling techniques like those outlined in the section on lived experience later in this guide.

The PICO examples table resource gives some example methods that other social innovations have used to give you some ideas.

Step 2: Pragmatic considerations:

When thinking about the data you are gathering and how you work with it, you should also contemplate the following:

- Abilities of the target group, for example:
 - Digital natives might feel most comfortable completing a questionnaire online on their own.
 - People who are not regular users of digital technology might prefer to be interviewed face-to-face.
 - A written questionnaire won't be appropriate for people with low levels of literacy.
 - People in challenging life situations or with impairments may appreciate shorter time frames for completion or conversation (or alternative assessment modes altogether, such as peer-consultation).
- Type of service, for example:
 - If you are running an online platform, it might be easy to implement a short online survey into the provision process (even a before and after comparison). It will be much harder to recruit participants for an online survey if you are providing an in-person service.
- Prior knowledge (and combination of methods), for example:
 - If you are doing many things with many supposed outcomes, you might want to do a scoping survey to see which effects are most important and then do a more focussed follow-up survey or interviews to gain more depth.
 - If you are doing something uniquely new and see changes, but are not quite sure what they are, you might want to explore through in-depth interviews and then check emergent focuses with a larger-scale survey.

	<p>Step 3: Look at examples:</p> <p>The bottom line is, different activities will require different measurement designs. The PICO examples table resource gives three examples that build on PICO considerations. Have a look at these and then try to summarise your approach on the PICO summary template.</p>
Templates	<p>PICO examples table</p> <p>PICO summary template</p>

Find out more: Which data should I use and how?

Different outcomes (or impacts) require different approaches to gathering and analysing data. For example, if your desired outcomes are situated in the area of behaviour change, you will want to track that transformation process. To get to a detailed description of the transformation process you might choose to systematically conduct and analyse interviews. Have a read of this blog post to explore this arena further: <https://gorgi-krlev.medium.com/yo-peace-8f0f37902934>

However, if your impact measurement is looking at whether using virtual reality applications to enhance the prevention of bullying are more effective than in-person training, you might want to compare your virtual reality activities with a control group participating in established training to detect differences (with or without random allocation into groups).

It is also important to realise that there may be no comparator at all. For example, when you have developed an innovative approach to skill homeless people, there might be no alternative intervention so that you would need to compare your effects to people having no access to such targeted help.

Step 3: Putting measurement into practice

Description	This activity focuses on how you can implement an impact measurement process.
Resource Level	<p>Experience: Intermediate</p> <p>Time: 2 - 5 days (research, discussion/reflection and compilation of results)</p> <p>Cost: Medium</p>
Materials	<p>Desk-based research facilities, note-making materials</p> <p>Impact measurement flowchart plan</p>
Step-by-step guide	<p>Step 1: What data are you already gathering?</p> <p>Make a list of the data that is already being gathered around the social innovation or its activities. This could be quantitative indicators you are collating (such as new registrations for a service or downloads of an app) or more informal, qualitative</p>

pieces of data like comment or feedback cards. The SWOT of current data and insights resource in Section 1, may be useful for thinking this through.

Step 2: How can you work more formally with this data?

Think about how this existing data could be gathered or analysed in a more systematic way to help demonstrate impact. You may want to do some desk-based research into different ways of working with data, ask people in your team about their knowledge, or approach the Community of Practice you have created for their ideas. You may also find the GECES Sub-group (2014) guide on social impact measurement useful here, particularly the chapters on ‘Stakeholders and their needs’ and ‘Defining good measurement’.

Step 3: Where are the gaps?

From the above, think about the gaps in data. What else might you need to introduce to gather and analyse the data you need to demonstrate impact?

Step 4: Putting your ideas into practice

You are now in a position to start gathering your data and working with it. You may find it useful to put this down into the simple Impact measurement flowchart plan we have produced as a resource.

Top Tip: First steps into impact measurement may be small and not all organisations need to go the entire way through the process. We recommend that you start to engage with some impact measurement activities and gradually expand your capacity to understand your impact as you progress with the social innovation. This will support scaling in the best possible way.

Templates

Impact measurement flowchart plan

Top Tips

1. Do not waste time and energy performing impact measurement merely as a tick-box exercise: Make sure you give enough time to the above activities to properly consider how you measure your impact. Without investing this time, the results you get may not be very valuable learning material.
2. Do not feel scared by the complexity of impact: Use the above steps to define a measurement approach that is right for you. Start with small, simple ventures into impact measurement and then grow them as you scale.
3. Think differently about what you consider to be data. Important reference points could be: testimonials, feedback you receive at stakeholder events, social media posts and much more. Much of this data would need to be expanded and gathered and analysed more systematically than this is usually the case in standard practice, but it can provide a very valuable starting point.

Resource: Impact measurement - PICO template

Participants Who are the intended beneficiaries (direct or indirect) of the social innovation? Who are the core target groups?	Intervention What is it exactly that the social innovation does that is supposed to create effects for the target groups?
Comparative What are our activities additional to? What is the standard intervention? (Remark: your activities may be so new and innovative that there is nothing to compare it to)	Outcomes What main effects is the social innovation aiming to produce?

Resource: PICO examples table

Social Innovation	Community-oriented housing	School programme for prosocial behaviour	Political web platform
Participants	Older people requiring support (60+ years/disabled/care needs)	Students 14+ years old	Citizens and politicians using the platform
Intervention	Community oriented living model promoting self-activation, self-responsibility and mutual support	Boxing and video work	Provision of a platform for political exchange and more transparency
Comparator	Assisted living	None (tracing of potential transformation through qualitative material)	None (comparison to average population)
Outcomes/Impacts (examples)	Social contacts (numbers of, frequency, intensity, importance) Reciprocal support (companionship, emotional etc.)	Level of violence Respect	Interest in politics Engagement Interaction between citizens and politicians
Chosen method	Quantitative In-person, assisted paper-survey with control group	Qualitative (and quantitative) Interviews (and before-after scoping survey to identify relevant points)	Quantitative Online survey, with retrospective accounts on areas of improvement
Additional Material	https://gorgi-krlev.medium.com/how-dyou-wanna-live-when-you-re-old-er-35d565c7910c	https://gorgi-krlev.medium.com/yo-peace-8f0f37902934	https://gorgi-krlev.medium.com/lets-chat-politics-can-we-re-engage-citizens-digitally-5d5c96b98290

Resource: PICO summary template

Social Innovation Title	
Participants	
Intervention	
Comparator	
Outcomes/Impacts (examples)	
Chosen method(s)	

Resource: Impact measurement flowchart plan

