

Scaling a social innovation? Measure your impact with... Process Tracing



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About the Author

Dr. Gorgi Krlev

Gorgi Krlev is a senior researcher at the [Centre for Social Investment \(CSI\)](#) of [Heidelberg University](#) and a Visiting Professor at [Politecnico di Milano](#). Gorgi holds a PhD from the University of Oxford (Kellogg College) and serves on the Board of Directors of Euclid Network.

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 - process-tracing – 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.

Process tracing

Socially innovative organisational practices are often looked at with an exclusive focus on the outcomes they produce. However, as social innovations aim to change social practices of target groups and their surrounding environment, and are usually enhanced when a variety of actors collaborate, a process perspective is warranted (Anheier, Krlev & Mildemberger, 2018).

Process tracing is a method from political science. In order to understand how a transformative process has occurred, it looks at the events, actors and context factors in retrospect. Process tracing uses a rigid analytical strategy of probing questions. These probing questions aim to uncover:

- what the critical junctions were in a change process,
- who the actors involved were and what role they played
- what contextual factors ensured success.

For example, it could be used to explain how a new law got passed despite political contestation, or the completion of major political projects such as that of European integration (Bennett and Checkel, 2017). Because it looks backwards and tries to answer questions to “solve” the puzzle of how change came about, it can be compared to “whodunnit?” detective stories. This complex and plot-driven literary genre centres on who committed the crime, and how and why the culprit has done it. Process tracing uses a similar detective process to look back, investigate through questioning, and understand.

We know that social innovations are marked by a high degree of local embeddedness and typically depend on a unique combination of enabling factors rather than a universal formula (Krlev et al., 2019). Because of this, the processes and results of scaling almost never look like the original social innovation. What is more, the concept of scaling itself, in a social innovation context, is much more complex than its commercial counterparts. It may involve different types of scaling as outlined in the Ways to scale summary in Section 1 of this guide.

These different types of scaling underline that scaling in the social innovation context does not equal organizational growth. Quite the contrary, many scaling processes of social innovation are about transferring practices to other contexts or sectors, or of mobilizing a coalition of actors to promote a joint cause. Such collective action types of innovation and scaling require a clear initial idea of the process and continuous learning as the process evolves to be able to steer it appropriately. This means that process tracing is a good learning tool for social innovations as they scale.

Why is process tracing useful?

Process tracing is an effective methodology for implementing a learning as you scale strategy because:

- I. Probing questions provide focus and allow for critical thinking: The probing questions ensure that you have all essential elements of scaling thought through and help to prompt you to challenge the original version of your scaling strategy. For example, the probing may help you to detect new players, might encourage you to go back to your conceptualization phase, or adapt your scaling plan.

2. Supports the documentation of the learning journey: From an institutional or policy perspective, process tracing has an additional value added, because it helps document the learning journey of social innovators during their scaling. Other social innovators can use systematic insights that the process tracing generates to pursue successful strategies, or avoid mistakes.
3. Allows social innovations to see alternatives: Process tracing enables you to establish a constructive, yet critical account of what alternatives are already there as you plan to scale (retrospective function); and to project where the social innovation (and its impact, see next section) could be going in the future (projective function).
4. Provides evidence for sustaining the innovation: In relation to funders or regulators, the prospective function - looking at future direction of the innovation - can help make the case for why the innovation should receive further support and what kind of support would result in the highest impact. Using process tracing for this purpose can help establish a more long-term focus in supporting social innovation, which is often called for but rarely implemented in practice.

How to... do process tracing

We suggest social innovators apply process tracing in their scaling processes in the following three stages:

- **Conceptualising:** Identifying key people and phases of the scaling process. You may find the Who to involve resource in Section 2 useful here as well.
- **Probing:** Revisiting core reflective questions at regular intervals in the scaling process.
- **Envisioning:** Looking at what is being learned and how it fits into the bigger picture.

Here are three short overviews of how you can apply these three phases in your own social innovation.

Top Tips

1. Be prepared to have your original assumptions challenged: Process tracing helps us to understand the scaling process. It may show us different ways we can be scaling our innovations.
2. Keep it lean: Decide on the key areas you are going to probe and focus on them. Trying to do too much can over complicate things.
3. Think carefully about who to involve and when: The stakeholders and actors you bring into process tracing activities can change over time. Involve the right people at the right time.

Phase: Conceptualisation

Description	An individual or group reflective activity that aims to support social innovators to identify the key stakeholders and phases in their scaling process.
Resource Level	Experience: Beginner Time: 1 - 2 hours Cost: Low
Materials	Note-taking and/or group thinking materials (flipchart and post-it notes or digital equivalent) for initial ideas Process tracing - conceptualisation mind-map
Step-by-step guide	<p>Step 1: Stakeholders Reflect on the following questions and make notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the stakeholders that must be involved in the scaling (and who are the ones that do not seem essential)? Who might we have to exclude? • Depending on how the scaling should look like and where it wants to go) • What stakeholders need to be involved that were not present in the original setting? <p>Step 2: Phases - Reflect on the following questions and make notes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the most critical phases, events or junctions to be expected? When will those likely occur? • How do we make sure we are not only documenting these instances, but maintain our ability to govern the process? <p>Step 3: Use the Process tracing - conceptualisation mind-map resource to collate your final answers.</p>
Templates	Process tracing - conceptualisation mind-map

Phase: Probing

Description	A group reflective activity that aims to support social innovators to reflect on and understand their scaling process.
Resource Level	Experience: Beginner Time: 15 minutes to 1 hour Cost: Low
Materials	Group note-taking materials (flipchart and post-it notes or digital equivalent) Process tracing log

Step-by-step guide	<p>Step 1: Bring a group of stakeholders and actors in the social innovation together to discuss the probing questions below. We recommend you embed this into your learning process, and it can be included in the 'sense-check session'.</p> <p>Step 2: Work with your group to reflect on the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Have new players appeared on the scene? Which roles have they taken? Have unexpected events occurred? How did they influence the process? Which adaptations needed to be made and why? What will this mean for a repetition of the scaling process into some other direction later on (or for other scaling processes)? <p>Step 3: Log these reflections on the Process tracing log resource to help you to see progression.</p> <p>Top tip: You could use these questions to structure the discussions 'Learnings and Actions' section of the sense-check session template plan from Section 1.</p>
Templates	Process tracing log

Phase: Envisioning

Description	A group reflective activity that aims to support social innovators to position the scaling innovation into a wider context and focus on the future of the social innovation.
Resource Level	<p>Experience: Beginner</p> <p>Time: 1 - 2 hours</p> <p>Cost: Low</p>
Materials	Group note-taking materials (flipchart and post-it notes or digital equivalent)
Step-by-step guide	<p>Step 1: Bring a group of stakeholders and actors in the social innovation together to discuss the reflective questions below. We recommend you embed this into your learning process and work with the group of people you have identified to be a part of this.</p> <p>Step 2: Work with your group to reflect on the following questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> How does the scaling fit into the bigger picture? Have impacts been triggered that were unexpected and could be considered spill-over effects? How does the momentary success and sustainability of the scaling depend on institutional factors (for example political support, perception and acceptance by (new) target groups etc.)? <p>Step 3: Identify with your group what we learn from the answers to the above questions about the future of the social innovation. This may include:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> ideas for new innovations

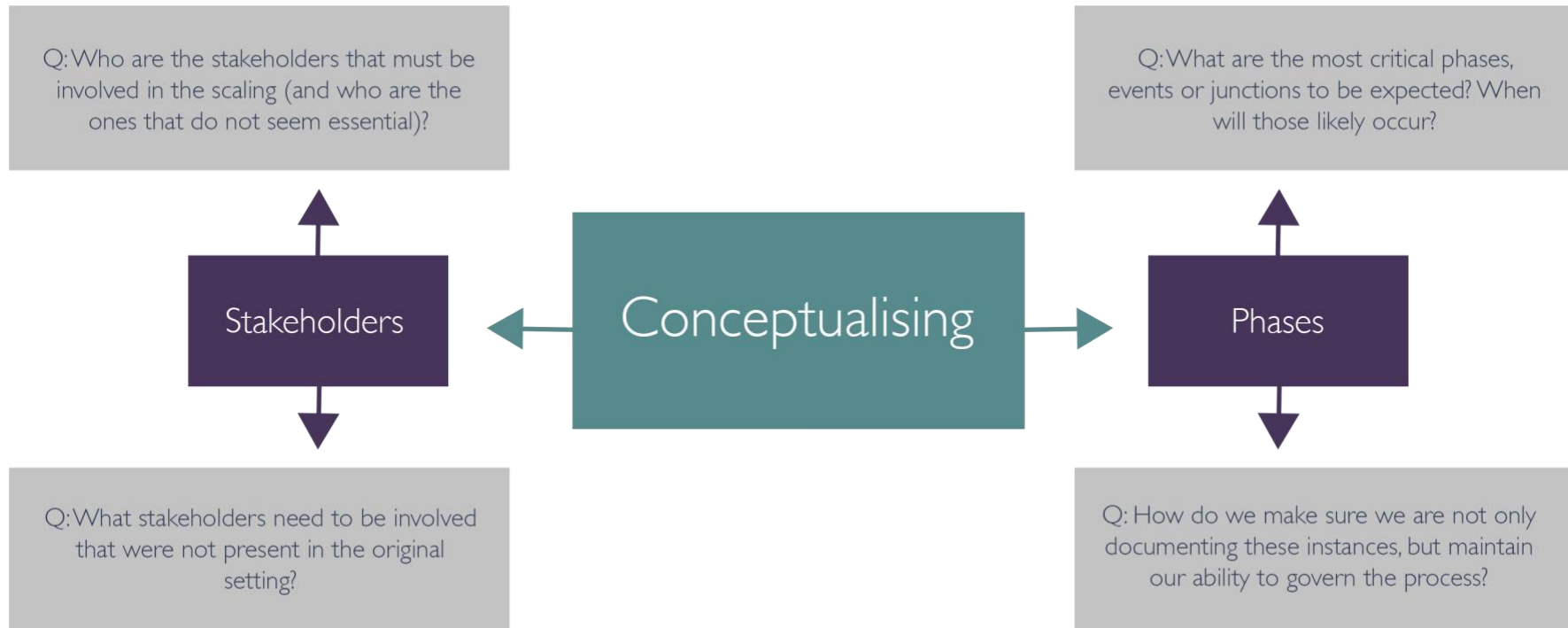
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> b) sustainability c) future directions <p>Top tip: This phase is best implemented when the scaling process starts to generate wider impact (not at the start of your journey). You may want to use the above steps as an alternative structure for some of the sense-check sessions outlined in Section 2 of this guide in the later stages of your scaling plan. This structure will help your group of stakeholders and actors think about the future of the innovation and be a part of making concrete plans about this.</p>
Templates	<p>A group reflective activity that aims to support social innovators to position the scaling innovation into a wider context and focus on the future of the social innovation.</p>

When you go through these activities, we recommend you follow a lean approach that focuses on the most important elements and stakeholders. So, the stresses in italics are purposefully employed. We do this for two reasons:

1. Following up on every possible aspect in the greatest detail will overburden social innovators and deteriorate the value of the exercise.
2. You should not seek to activate all possible stakeholders right at the start. The scaling of social innovation needs different stakeholders and their competencies at different points in time. Involving too many, especially those who have an interest in maintaining the status quo, might prevent a process from unfolding, while involving too few may prevent the innovation from getting to the next impact level.

What is most important can be identified by working with the group of stakeholders you are involving in your learning process (your learning community or Community of Practice), as outlined in Section 2.

Resource: Process tracing - Conceptualisation mind-map



Resource: Process tracing log

Question	Probe points notes	Probe points notes	Probe points notes
Have new players appeared on the scene? Which roles have they taken?			
Have unexpected events occurred? How did they influence the process?			
Which adaptations needed to be made and why? What will this mean for a repetition of the scaling process into some other direction later on (or for other scaling processes)?			