Evaluating social outcomes

Many arts and cultural programs and activities aim to achieve social outcomes such as community building, increased participation in education, improved mental health and wellbeing, support for communities to rebuild after disasters, promotion of cultural diversity, and so on.

It is important at the outset of your program or activity to develop an evaluation plan so you can talk about the extent to which intended social outcomes were met and learn about what worked well or what could be improved in the future.

There is no one-size-fits-all model for evaluating social outcomes as the approach you take will depend on the type of social outcomes being tested, stakeholder expectations about the nature of the evaluation and resources you have available including the evaluation skills and experience of personnel involved.

Here are some ideas to think about as a starting point:

- When designing your evaluation plan, **think about who your audience is for the evaluation findings**. What sort of evidence are they looking for and what would they find credible? You may have multiple audiences with different information requirements. If you are partnering with another organisation or sector, work together to develop an evaluation framework and measures that meet both sets of needs. Participatory evaluation approaches that involve project participants and service users in the design of measures can also be effective, particularly if you want to build community ownership.

- It is critical that you **clearly define what social outcomes you are hoping to achieve** through your activity. Be as specific as possible, be realistic about what is achievable in the timeframe you have for your project and include indicators of success. For example, rather than just identify 'educational outcomes', develop a more specific objective such as: 'Contribute to positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students in year 9 of Hartley High School, including improved school attendance and increased feelings of engagement with the school community.'

- As part of this, it can help to document your **theory of change or program logic** – how will what you do impact on the social outcomes you hope to achieve? A theory of change or program logic diagram maps the relationship between your activities and the short, medium and long-term outcomes you expect as a result. It is also important to articulate the assumptions that underpin your theory of change – how and why do you think your activities will achieve the outcomes you have identified? Spending time on this process is helpful in setting realistic goals – in the time and resources you have, is it realistic to expect the long-term outcomes you have mapped, or are short and medium term outcomes more plausible?

- Once you have clearly defined the social outcomes you hope to achieve, you can start to **identify how you will measure your indicators of success**. Using the example above, 'improved school attendance' could be measured by asking the teacher to track school attendance rates for participating students during the course of the project and compare these with attendance rates in the three months prior to the project commencing. An indicator such as 'increased feelings of engagement with the school community' could be measured through student feedback surveys or focus groups which ask participants about the extent to which, and how, the project has increased their sense of connection or belonging while at school.

- While it is important to identify specific indicators and measures you will track, try not to be so narrow in your focus that you miss learning about unintended outcomes. Make sure you **build some more open and exploratory questions into your evaluation process** to capture the unexpected. Again using the above example, this might be as simple as asking the teacher if they noticed any other changes (positive or negative) during the course of the project. An evaluation that finds the unexpected can be as valuable as one that confirms what you set out to achieve.

- When thinking about how to approach your evaluation, **consider if there are existing measurement instruments you can adopt or adapt**. This is particularly helpful if the social outcome you are seeking to achieve is too abstract or complex to be evidenced by just one measure – for example, outcomes such as 'social cohesion' or 'wellbeing'. How have other researchers translated these abstract concepts into specific indicators and measures?

- It is also valuable to **consider if your evaluation can build on the existing body of evidence and literature**. What have been the findings of other research or evaluation in the same or a similar area? How might you design your evaluation to build on this literature, either by confirming the findings or identifying new or different learnings?

- There are **many different methodologies commonly used in evaluations of social outcomes**, depending on the type of findings you are seeking (e.g. quantitative, qualitative), the scale of your evaluation and the resources available to you. Some of these methods include:

  - **Structured surveys, interviews or focus groups** with project participants or stakeholders about outcomes experienced – in particular, pre- and post-test surveys can be useful when trying to measure change (for example, asking participants to rate their awareness of particular environmental issues before they commence the project and then asking them the same set of questions again at the end of the project to test whether awareness has increased)

  - **Case studies** with identified project participants or stakeholders that track their experience over time – this is particularly useful for developing an in-depth understanding of how people engage with your project and what elements of project design help achieve a particular social outcome

  - **Most Significant Change (MSC)** as a specific methodology which uses interview and case study approaches to collect 'significant change stories' from people engaged in a project – this approach is particularly suited to exploratory evaluation where the indicators of success are not pre-determined

  - **Empirical data collection and analysis** where this is suited to the indicators and measures you have identified, such as tracking school attendance rates or counting the number of new community networks established as a result of your project. Do you have access to data before the project commenced as a benchmark for measuring change?

  - **Social return on investment (SROI)** as a specialised evaluation approach for larger-scale programs, requiring the services of an evaluator with SROI training and experience – this involves using qualitative and quantitative data to attribute a proxy financial value to social outcomes, ultimately producing a SROI ratio as an account of value created (e.g. for every $1 invested, the SROI was $2)

- In analysing and reporting findings, **be clear about what you can reasonably attribute to your project and avoid over-claiming**. It is often safer to talk about 'contribution' rather than cause-and-effect 'attribution' (e.g. 'the findings suggest that this project made a positive contribution to increasing school attendance rates'). Consider providing some commentary on other factors outside your project

that may also have contributed to the social outcomes being achieved. This will help establish the credibility of your evaluation and in turn, your project more broadly.

- Remember **evaluation is not about 'passing' or 'failing'** and it is commonly the case that some outcomes will be achieved and others not, or some project elements will work well and others will need strengthening or changing. This is the value of evaluation – it is an opportunity to test your assumptions and intentions and reflect on learnings as part of an ongoing cycle of development.

Other resources
Arts Queensland has developed other fact sheets and resources also relevant to this topic including:

- Getting started with evaluation fact sheet
- Developing and implementing surveys fact sheet
- Engaging an external evaluator fact sheet
- Program logic (theory of change) template
- Evaluation plan template

These are available at www.arts.qld.gov.au