

Time for NPOs to show their real impact

By [Keri-Leigh Paschal](#)

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Traditionally, non-profit organisations (NPOs) have measured their performance in terms of how many rands they raised, how many they spent, and how many people they helped along the way. That's just not good enough anymore. Today, South Africa's NPOs are having to change the way they measure the impact of their work to secure their futures - and those of the people who depend on them.



Keri-Leigh Paschal, executive trustee at social impact initiative Nation Builder

Measuring social impact is critical for a number of reasons, not least of which is the need to secure continued funding at a time when donors are cutting back on their spending, and social needs have escalated. Good measurement also identifies initiatives that are not performing at their best, so the necessary changes can be made to ensure that every rand has the biggest impact possible.

But how do NPOs assess something as nebulous as social change? What metrics does one use to measure and evaluate actual social impact, especially where every organisation's work and outcomes are different? It's a major challenge, but it's one that the entire sector is having to confront as they look to not only make a greater impact, but to demonstrate that impact in a way that donors can be assured that their resources are having a meaningful effect.

Clear thought process critical

If we define social impact as the effect that your actions have on people, communities and broader society, measuring that impact starts with having a clear understanding of what you, as a funder or NPO, want to achieve. What are the outcomes that you want to see? What kind of inputs are needed to

achieve that goal? This type of clear thought process is critical to ensuring that every investment is not only secured, but then goes as far as possible.

Many NPOs fall into the trap of trying to be everything to everybody. In the process, they spread themselves too fine and their impact is diluted or lost. By having a laser focus on who you are and what you should be, you will know what you need to measure. And that doesn't mean measuring the number of meals given out: the real impact comes through demonstrating whether the recipients have gained weight, are healthier, and have better cognitive abilities, for example.



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Producing data that matters

To do this, it's important to produce data that matters, and that includes the voices of the people who are impacted. This data must be actionable by the NPOs doing the work, and provide insights and guidance for the funders who support that work.

A great example of this is OVCmeasure, a measuring and evaluation application developed for orphaned and vulnerable

children care organisations. OVCmeasure talks specifically about moving beyond counting the number of children it serves, to quantifying the change it is effecting in their lives.

OVCmeasure measures the well-being of beneficiaries, based on the Child Status Index (CSI) used by Unicef. The data gathered, through questionnaires and notes, is then aggregated and interpreted to support decision-making, specifically in terms of resource allocation, programmes and interventions.

OVCmeasure's CEO, Meyer Conradie, describes social impact measurement as "a marriage between science and real life, using hard science and the hearts of employees together to ensure a true and lasting impact". That's the perfect description of social impact measurement – and it's one that we'd certainly like to see adopted more broadly across the NPO sector.

Right now, we're facing a watershed moment for the social impact sector. Our challenge is to use impact measurement as a transformative opportunity, both for the sector and the millions of South Africans who depend on it. It's an opportunity we can't afford to miss.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keri-Leigh Paschal, executive trustee at social impact initiative Nation Builder

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