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Three paths for measuring the impact of social design



Illustration: Olaf Hajek

challenge for social impact designers is that they are often contributing primarily at the front-end of a social change intervention (whether social enterprise or development/humanitarian-oriented). This can lead to the “tree falling in forest syndrome,” meaning that the added value of design and design thinking may go unnoticed because there are no boots-on-the-ground to observe or measure the outcomes of the intervention.

This essay outlines three paths for measuring the impact of social design (also called design for social change). The first path is to “follow the data” by applying design to a program that already has a built-in measurement system. The second path is to query the “design allies” who are implementing social change interventions in collaboration with designers or by using human centered design and other design-centric approaches (or both). The third path is to “design the measurement system” you want to see in the world (to adapt a well-known saying by Gandhi).

While some have contributed in recent years by defining the field, others have focused more concretely on the word “impact” in social impact design. Writing in the Stanford Social Innovation Review in 2014, Robert Fabricant of the Design Impact Group asked: “When will design get serious about impact?” Fabricant proposed integrating design more fully within the spectrum of implementation. One opportunity, he wrote, was to:

Contextualize design within a broader model of analysis and strategic planning, working with colleagues who have a richer and deeper toolset in strategy, finance, operations, and M&E [monitoring and evaluation] that has proven its value in development.

Catapult Design’s co-founder Heather Fleming, a featured speaker at this year’s American Evaluation Association conference, is another contributor to the conversation on impact. One step toward “getting serious” about impact, she suggested, is to recognize that evaluation professionals have a lot to offer designers, and vice versa.

The ongoing conversation about design’s impact (or contribution) in the social sector, and how to measure it, continued in early 2017 at the “first summit on measuring the impact of design” hosted by New York’s School of Visual Arts. The three paths that follow are a

contribution to this discussion, informed by 15 years working in the field of international development, and more recent experiences as a design researcher with a front row view of several collaborations between social impact designers and international organizations working on social change issues around the world.

Path 1: Follow the data

In an international development context, national governments and health systems have easy access to large data sets: How many children vaccinated, how many births registered, etc. While it may be more common for social impact designers to collaborate with foundations, international non- governmental organizations, and/or United Nations agencies, working with national governments provides the opportunity to influence a system that has data collection built in. If funding is limited, third party support can be sought, a model that CGAP (Consultative Group to Assist the Poor) has fruitfully employed. Imagine a scenario where the coverage rate for routine immunization for young children in districts X and Y have been low but steady for the past two years. Then, social impact designers get involved to co-create and prototype with local community members and health service personnel new ways to improve services and increase uptake. Fast forward six months, district X has seen a 10% increase in coverage while district Y, where new approaches were not tested, remain the same. Hello measurable contribution.

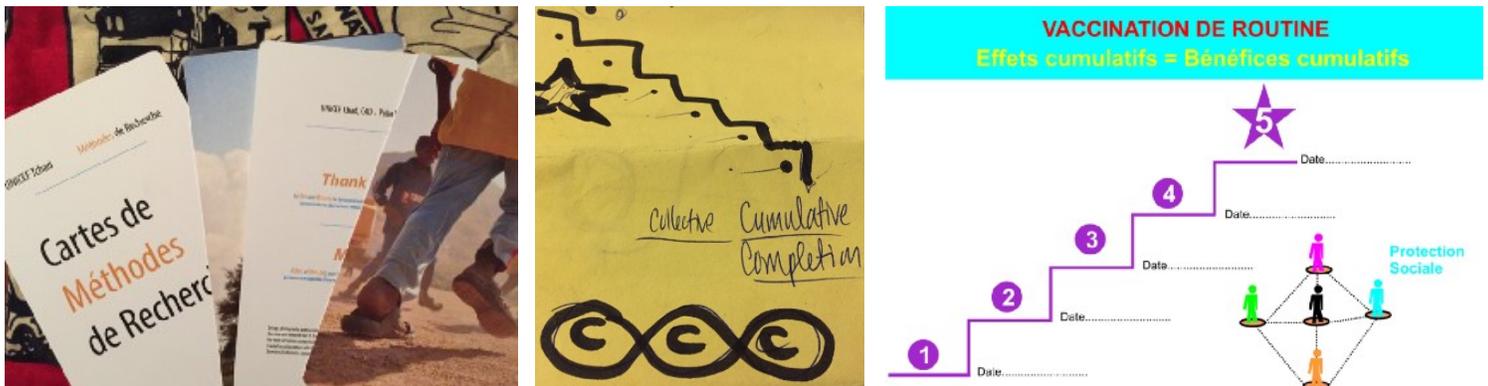
Path 2: Ask the implementers

John Snow Inc, the American Refugee Committee, Mercy Corps, and International Rescue Committee—just to name a few, are international development and humanitarian organizations bringing human centered design (HCD) research and principles into their social change interventions. They do so either through direct implementation, or in collaboration with design firms. Organizations applying design skills and approaches to financial inclusion (like CGAP) and social impact investing (like Acumen) would be rich contributors to discussions on the role and importance of design in social change efforts.

A question for implementers, ripe for the asking, is this:

Q: How have you used human centered design—or other design services—in your work, and what difference has it made?

While I was at UNICEF/Chad, our team of field communicators from the Polio eradication unit used French-language research cards adapted (with permission) from IDEO’s method cards to learn about community members habits and attitudes related to vaccination. The result of home visits, the “personal inventory” technique and rapid prototyping was the “Staircase to Health” (L’escalier à la santé). The Staircase is a one-page vaccination calendar to be hung visibly in the house, helping parents see the cumulative benefits of vaccination and track the dates of their health center appointments. After validation by the Chadian government, the Staircase will be piloted at the district level, and existing health center data (see path #1) will help gauge changes (if any) in vaccination cycle completion as a result of the home-based reminder system.



French language research cards (left) an early sketch (center) and later draft design (right) of the “staircase for health” vaccination calendar. Photos, K. Greiner and staircase design, A. Dionro, UNICEF/Chad

Path 3: Design the measurement system

Designer involvement in the conception of tools and systems for measuring social change would be a win-win scenario. Implementing organizations would benefit from designers’ creativity and systems-thinking, and designers would gain access to the data they helped to generate, as a demonstrable result of their contributions to international development. Currently at Equal Access International, where I serve as Director of Research, we face challenges in

measuring the media and community engagement activities we implement. For example, for our radio programs aiming to shift norms on gender-based violence in Nepal, we have built measurement tools into our program design and can successfully track the comments and number of listeners who get in touch by SMS or our inter-active voice response (IVR) system. We know that influencing entrenched social norms does not happen over night, and therefore we are still searching for ways to measure and document how conversations and mindsets are qualitatively shifting over time.

In our programs in the Sahel, we've noticed that radio soap-opera listeners have begun asking for copies of episodes at community radio stations, which they store on SD cards to play later on their cell phones and share with others via bluetooth or Xender (very popular in Chad, we learned). We are eager to document how, and how often, digital content is being shared by listeners. The impact of a designer's insights on how to develop a measurement system would be easily discernible: we would have data on this novel listener behavior whereas now we have none.



The telephone of a listener in N'Djamena Chad, with SD card used to record and play radio episodes. Photo: K. Greiner

Experienced designers and evaluation professionals may recommend alternate paths or approaches for measuring the impact of social design. Given the complex and ever-changing nature of human behavior and social change initiatives, the more minds applied to this challenge the better.

Spanish poet Antonio Machado once wrote, “*we make the path by walking*” (se hace camino al andar). If we’re serious about impact, we can design and walk a range of paths to social change, but we’ll only improve and innovate if we measure along the way.

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With gratitude to Cynthia Hannah for her comments, and to Olaf Hajek for permission to replicate here his lovely illustration, which has been brightening my day since I clipped it out of the newspaper years ago (Yellow measuring tape added to image)