Stories of Change

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This paper provides a brief introduction to stories of change as a tool for communicating progress and the value of a given project in an interesting and accessible way. It has been developed as part of the Global Open Knowledge Hub (GOKH) however the lessons can be translated to a wide range of programmes.

Introduction

Stories of change are used to explore and demonstrate change that has occurred as a result of a project or programme. They are often used in development interventions to supplement quantitative indicators of success and communicate changes in knowledge, behaviours, attitudes and practice that cannot easily be captured in quantitative metrics. They can be combined with more simplistic quantitative indicators to build up a picture of progress towards the overall projects goals.

Particularly in complex or innovative programmes, stories of change can bring the project to life for external audiences as they may be more able to identify with the results of the programme through the use of real life examples. Stories of change will not usually attempt to illustrate the overall results of the intervention but often one well-chosen example of success can lead to a wider understanding of the projects overall results or the potential future results. It therefore equips you with something accessible to convey to others the value of the programme and provides funders with a tool by which to communicate to a wider audience the value of the work they are funding.

Stories of change should also generate substantial learning opportunities for both internal and external stakeholders alike. The process of developing the story of change requires reflection and investigation into the factors that have enabled and constrained the change to occur. The knowledge gained through this process is then captured and stored in the story, strengthening the institutional memory of your organisation. Although many stories of change focus on positive results, they can also be used as a powerful tool to investigate circumstances when results were not achieved. By identifying the constraining factors at play, important lessons can be learnt about the assumptions underlying the intervention.

The trouble with illustrating 'impact'

Stories of change can capture any moment along the results chain and do not need to focus on impact level results. It is extremely important to recognise that impact is not linear, it takes time and that it may be several years before the relevance of some work is fully recognised / absorbed, or for changes to take place in bureaucratic, social, and economic systems. Impact level results rely on many external factors that are often outside the control of the programme, and therefore attribution or contribution to impact may be hard to measure, or impact may never be achieved.

We can therefore use stories of change to demonstrate that we are moving towards or contributing to this impact therefore illustrating positive change towards impact level results, even if impact level results cannot be measured.

Why stories of change are important for GOKH

In the example of GOKH, 'impact' is defined as 'evidence-informed policy making and practice by development actors which will ultimately contribute to improvements in the lives of poor people'. To achieve this, GOKH aims to make research content open and available via a hub, which in turn makes it easier for knowledge intermediaries to provide access to that content in ways which are valued and used by policy makers and practitioners.

Changes in the preferences of individual actors (ways of doing / thinking / presenting) or in the framing of issues by organisations, may be the beginning of a movement along a 'pathway' towards impact level results. The utility of GOKH, the accessibility of research, the incremental change it makes to the Open Knowledge agenda, and the actions of partners, can and should illustrate positive change towards impact level results, even if impact level results of "evidence-informed policy making" cannot be measured.

It is therefore important to collect stories of change which document a range changes that have occurred as a direct result of GOKH. It is also important to document if and how activities / outputs have contributed to both anticipated and unanticipated changes along the results chain.

Selecting the story

To help you select the story of change you want to communicate you will need to consider the following:

1. Your **motivation** for developing the story;
2. The intended **audience** of your story;
3. The **type of issues** you would like to highlight; and
4. How you will **identify the example** to use in the story of change.

Stories of change can be a donor requirement, they could be used for marketing, for use in project proposals, and they could be used for internal learning processes or documenting change for the organisation. Stories of change can also satisfy a number of purposes at once. It is therefore important to carefully consider your motivation for developing the story of change.

If, for example, the story is required by a donor to demonstrate the results of a programme, you may wish to consult the programme's logical framework or theory of change to produce a list of possible changes the donors might be interested in. If the motivation is for organisational learning, then individuals within the organisation might be consulted to identify areas of learning or difficulty that would benefit from additional reflection. If it is for marketing or a project proposal, then you might want to explore a story that encapsulates and represents collective results that are common throughout the programme.

Once you have thought about the audience, your motivation for developing the story, and the type of issues you would like to write about, you might need to carry out some additional consultations with stakeholder to help you identify the story. Some common ways to explore stories are:

- **Surveys and interviews** - to investigate changes that your organisation might not be aware of. You might wish to send a short survey to partners, participants, and/or beneficiaries to identify results that you wish to explore further. Respondents should be asked about anticipated and unanticipated changes.

- **Focus groups** – when key stakeholder numbers are smaller. It also allows a space for discussion and debate on the changes that have occurred.

- **Informal discussions** - happen all the time and can be a useful way to find out about changes without the need to invest resources into the selection process.

Collecting the evidence

It is important not to make assumptions about the causal linkages within your story. The process of collecting the evidence should not just be used as a means to support your claims, it should be used to test them and find out more about the mechanisms at play.

The influence the story has on its audience will depend on the extent to which you can evidence your claims. You must be able to clearly articulate who influenced the changed, how this happened, why it happened, and when it happened. Evidence turns an anecdotal story into a meaningful story of change. However, a story of change should also be engaging and accessible. One needs to makes sure the evidence is available without the document being heavily footnoted.

Data sources may include: interviews, citations; photos; emails; policy documents; event agenda; briefing notes; funding bids; project documents and news items. The type of evidence and the data sources you select are entirely dependent on the nature of the story and the availability and accessibility of the evidence. When possible, triangulating and validating the evidence across the data sources will strengthen your claims but even in areas of your story with weaker evidence, transparency is required to demonstrate the relative strength of evidence.

You must be mindful of confidentiality issues when quoting sources and seek the required approval or anonymise the data sources where necessary.

Writing the story

Stories of change often need to communicate complex changes to a variety of specialist and non-specialist audiences. They need to be concise, clear, accessible, and engaging while also demonstrating evidence to support their claims. It is often a challenge to satisfy these competing demands, but you might wish to think about it in terms of the following:

- Target the story to your audience, pitch it at an appropriate level, and write it in a style that is accessible for a non-expert audience;
- Contain interesting and relevant information and make it simple and powerful;
- Make it very concise and engaging by concentrating on one change per story;
- Make it easy to navigate, digest and extract information from; and
- Include the 'human factor' by including photos and quotes to help bring this out.

In addition, the following template can be used to provide some structure to the story:

Introduction/Executive summary – A couple of paragraphs summing up the story

Baseline – Explain what the situation was before the intervention. This sets the scene for the reader and identifies the development challenge the project aimed to address.

Intervention – Outline what the activities and outputs were that contributed to the change.

Results (short / medium / long) – Outline the results and be clear about the extent to which you can demonstrate attribution or contribution using the available evidence. Be clear about the claims and whether you have achieved impact, or whether the story is demonstrating positive changes towards impact. It is also important to talk about the enabling and constraining factors influencing the change.

Conclusion – Outline the lessons learnt and the wider implications of the story.

If possible, you should weave the evidence into the baseline, intervention, and results section of the story.

More information

- See the chapter on 'stories' in this ODI toolkit Tools for Knowledge and Learning: A Guide for Development and Humanitarian Organisations
  http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/188.pdf

- See chapter 8 'Communication products: stories of change' in the following ODI paper Communicating Research A beginner's guide for researchers in Vietnam
  http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/7183.pdf

- See the Stories of change section in Monitoring and Evaluating Capacity Building: Is it really that difficult?
  http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/677/Praxis-Paper-23-Monitoring-and-Evaluating-Capacity-Building-is-it-really-that-difficult.pdf

- See the DFID Research and Evidence Division: Story Of Change Series for some examples of effective stories of change
  https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/dfid-research-stories-of-change