

PRINCIPLES FOR ASSESSING NETWORK EFFECTIVENESS

While there is no easy formula, there is an emerging set of principles that can help inform network impact assessment and, more generally, evaluation of efforts to change complex systems: consider the context, assess multiple pathways to impact and enable ongoing learning and collaboration.

At the heart of most of the recommendations is a **shift from a “logic model” view of the world** that assumes linearity, pure objectivity, and controllable comparisons, **to a systems-orientation** that understands networks as complicated webs of relationships embedded in complex and messy systems.

1. Consider the context

- ***Understand the context, how it’s changing and the implications for comparison.*** Networks are embedded in a context. The context changes the network and the network changes the context. As a result, you can’t easily measure network success by comparing one network to another, or positing what might have happened otherwise.
- ***Calibrate results against what might be expected at a given point in a network’s lifecycle.***

2. Assess multiple pathways to network impact

- ***Focus on meaningful contribution toward impact, rather than attribution.*** Given the complexity of networks and the systems in which they’re embedded, causal attribution is difficult to assign, if not impossible. Instead, focus on how network participants and projects are contributing towards long-term aspirations
- ***Look at indicators of impact at multiple levels:***
 - a) ***Connectivity:*** what is the nature of relationships within the network? Is everyone connected who needs to be? What is the quality of these connections? Does the network effectively bridge and embrace differences? Is the network becoming more interconnected? What is the network’s reach?
 - b) ***Network formation:*** how healthy is the network along multiple dimensions -- participation, network form, leadership, capacity, etc? Also, what products and services are the immediate results of network activity?
 - c) ***Field level outcomes:*** what progress is the network making on achieving its intended social impact (e.g. policy outcomes, change in the system)? How do you know?

- ***Evolve the evaluation approach with the network.*** Because networks themselves are dynamic and always evolving, it's impossible to determine fully in advance the evaluation design. It will likely shift as the network changes.

3. Contribute to ongoing learning and enable collaboration

- ***Assess often and early.*** Action can take a long-time to emerge from networks and tends to come in waves. Recognize that patterns of network activity may be sporadic and spread over a long time period, and adopt approaches to learning and evaluation that reflect this rhythm.
- ***Emphasize learning over near-term judgment,*** given the long time horizon for many networks. It's less about answers and assessing success or failure at a point and time, and more about continuous learning and adaptation to accelerate progress toward your goal.
- ***Evaluate networks collaboratively.*** Engage network participants in developing a system-wide picture of what is being tried and achieved by the various players.
- ***Build capacity for ongoing learning and evaluation.*** Invest in feedback loops and learning systems for ongoing assessment that help everyone build understanding together. This ensures real-time feedback, engages network participants in an ongoing strategic conversation and helps strengthen ownership of the network
- ***Learn openly and with others.*** Capture what you're learning, from your own experiments to work with a network mind-set and from the networks you're supporting. Along the way, share what you're learning so others can learn from you and open yourself up to learning from others.

Questions for Discussion:

- How might these principles be improved? What are other important considerations when assessing network effectiveness?
- What else do you want to know about assessing network effectiveness?