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HOW TO MAKE IT VISIBLE?

**ASSESSING SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC IMPACT IN CREATIVE
AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIES
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BEYOND METRICS: SOCIAL IMPACT, ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORKS, AND ALTERNATIVE EVALUATION METHODS APPLIED IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

In the growing discourse on social impact assessment, traditional evaluation frameworks have been widely adopted to measure the economic and social value generated by purpose-driven organizations. However, many of these methods are highly technical, resource-intensive, and often inaccessible to smaller enterprises or organizations with a limited capacity. Furthermore, the emphasis on quantifiable outcomes tends to oversimplify the complexities of social impact, failing to capture intangible, long-term, and systemic changes.

This paper explores alternative and participatory approaches to social impact assessment that go beyond rigid metrics, focusing on more participatory and adaptive evaluation methodologies more inherent to social phenomena and social innovation, proposing a new evaluation framework that integrates insights from multiple participatory methods. By examining the limitations of the most used impact assessment frameworks and highlighting their challenges in capturing social value effectively, the authors discuss the need for more context-specific and inclusive methodologies that integrate qualitative narratives and a more creative and

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participatory perspective on evaluation. Approaches such as participatory evaluation and creative evaluation are some options that offer potential alternatives by engaging stakeholders in co-defining impact and creating more **flexible, meaningful, and adaptive** evaluation processes. These methods allow for a deeper understanding of impact and value in the social realm beyond purely economic indicators, fostering a **learning-driven and context-sensitive** approach to evaluation.

Building on these methodologies, the paper presents an on-development step-by-step evaluation framework designed to offer small organizations a more flexible, meaningful, and social-driven approach to assessing their impact. The framework provides insights into how hybrid evaluation models, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches, can be more effective in reflecting the true value of social innovation initiatives. This paper identifies the key gaps in conventional methodologies and explores the ways how alternative models can enhance their applicability, particularly in organizations that prioritize social purpose but lack the infrastructure for complex impact assessment tools and aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on impact assessment by advocating for a shift towards participatory, adaptive, and contextually relevant evaluation methodologies, arguing that redefining impact assessment beyond rigid metrics is essential for organizations seeking to measure their contributions in a more holistic, inclusive, and sustainable manner.

Keywords: *social impact, evaluation, assessment framework, social innovation, design-driven evaluation.*

Introduction

For certain organizations, initiatives, and projects, the impact they generate on a social sphere can be the most important consideration, the main asset, and differentiator. Negative social impacts can reduce the intended benefits of an initiative and threaten its viability. In such cases, a social impact assessment is carried out to analyse the impacts of an initiative on individuals and communities to mitigate the adverse effects and enhance the positive effects, to in a near future visualize a framework to predict any form of social change.

There is no single definition of social impact that is widely agreed upon, as its scope differs from country to country, depending on the national arrangements or, more specifically, on the institutional aims of an organization. Many practitioners of social impact assessment and evaluators of social phenomena have tried to pinpoint and define the context, indicators, and general considerations of what could influence social impact; however, there is still a lack of understanding of what the scope is and what are its boundaries in relation to other social phenomena.

For the purposes of this paper, and to convey a better understanding of social impact, a more precise definition would be considered, as follows: “the consequences to individuals of any proposed action or initiative that changes their way of living and their quality of life”. [Cucino et al. 2025] Following this definition, and in addition to the factors that need to be considered to establish impact measurement, it is important to note that not all impacts, especially in the social realm, are easily quantifiable or measurable. Instead, they require further analysis in external and, in some cases, more complex variables.

Social impact is a significant aspect of many purpose-driven projects, small and large initiatives, and often the attention predominantly is focused on high-profile issues, where the results are expected to be the most visible on economic and environmental data. However, in reality, the actual effects and values are often found in more subtle areas, notably, community relationships, personal development, and civic engagement.

In the specific case of purpose-driven organizations and enterprises that are compromised in having a tangible impact, most of the process is taken by conventional and widely used instruments for social impact measurement, which tend to focus on metrics, outputs, and clear quantitative indicators that are easily translated into return on investment. These traditional approaches, while accepted and useful for some companies in capturing some aspects of social impact, leave behind and overlook important data on social issues.

The increasing interest in further understanding and reporting on social impact initiatives has led organizations, especially small nonprofit and purpose-driven ones, to adapt and transform a variety of frameworks and methodologies, usually performed by a small number of people, into a participatory assessment and evaluation, beginning at the earliest stage and continuing throughout the life of the intervention. Many practitioners are placing increasing consideration in monitoring, managing, and understanding the impact of the initiatives, in contrast to the performance of more established impact assessment tools, where practice, implementation, and follow-up are not being undertaken systematically and are often taken as a practice that cannot be grounded in the context of the organizations.

In this context, the current paper is dedicated to analysis of some participatory practices for evaluation that emerged as a need to monitor and understand the real meaning of social impact beyond traditional measures and related data, and to propose a framework that could offer considerable guidance in social impact evaluation, with specific reference to social innovation processes established by small organizations. The step-by-step guidelines outlined in the paper are sufficiently adaptable and aim to address the principles and main steps of social innovation, social impact processes

and evaluation to indicate how common issues around evaluation, measurement, and monitoring practices can be addressed and improved.

1. Rethinking social impact assessment needs, challenges and limitations

Social impact assessment can be performed using a variety of tools, methods, frameworks, and approaches. Many orientations in this field can be identified, there is a polarization between the rational-scientific approach, which focuses on the prediction of change, quantitative indicators, and measurable outcomes, and the socio-political approach, where the impact assessment prioritises stakeholder participation, empowerment, and context-sensitive processes oriented towards community development [Sadler et al. 2002]. Both approaches draw on different sources, such as data on the initiative being evaluated, previous experience with related initiatives, census or statistics on the target population, conditions, trends, surveys, and field research.

The rational-scientific approach is usually preferred by organizations and institutions that require quantifiable metrics and data-driven evidence to assess the impact of their initiatives. This approach prioritises prediction, quantification, and standardised metrics. It relies heavily on tools that convert social change into measurable indicators, drawing on statistical data, surveys, performance metrics, and cost-based calculations. Approaches such as Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA), Cost-Effectiveness Analysis (CEA) or Social Return on Investment (SROI), summarized in Table 1, fall within this paradigm. These tools provide structured and comparable

Table 1. Most frequently used social impact assessment tools in for-profit organizations. *Elaborated by the authors.*

<i>Tool</i>	<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Limitations</i>
SROI	Assigns monetary value to social outcomes, easy to communicate to funders	Difficult to monetize intangible outcomes; prone to oversimplification
B Impact Assessment	Standardized framework; certification-based; includes governance, workers, community, environment, and customers	Risk of impact-washing; limited transparency on scoring process
Theory of Change	Focus on causality and mapping of change; useful for planning and evaluation	Can be abstract and subjective; lacks standardized indicators
Balanced Scorecard	Aligns organizational goals with performance metrics; helps strategic planning	Mainly designed for internal strategy, less suitable for social impact

forms of evidence (strengths), yet tend to privilege outcomes that can be monetised or quantified (limitations), restricting their ability to capture intangible or emergent changes such as trust-building, community relationships, empowerment, or cultural value [Arvidson et al. 2010; O’Flynn & Barnett 2017].

In contrast, the socio-political approach is more commonly used by community-oriented organizations and initiatives that aim to engage stakeholders more actively in the evaluation process. This approach emphasises participation, context, and collective meaning-making. Rather than predicting change, it seeks to create understanding from the perspectives of stakeholders, communities, and beneficiaries. It typically uses qualitative or mixed-method tools such as stakeholder mapping, participatory workshops, community consultations, and narrative-based evaluations. These methods are valuable for revealing complex dynamics and locally meaningful forms of impact, yet they can be difficult to standardise or compare across contexts and often require substantial time or facilitation expertise [Manohar et al. 2016; Christou et al. 2021].

Table 2 below provides an overview of commonly used assessment tools aligned with the prediction of social change. These sets of tools consider qualitative and quantitative data, tool typology, complexity of application, and year of introduction.

However, both approaches come with their own limitations when applied to the complex nature of social impact. Depending on its scope, the tools and methods can help address the problem of incomplete data or highlight the variations of information from different data. However, the reliance on quantitative data and prediction-oriented models tends to limit the scope of what is considered as *impact*, often overlooking the more intangible, and emergent aspects of social change and value that are difficult to measure. Rational-scientific tools risk reducing impact to measurable outputs, overlooking relational and process-based outcomes. Meanwhile, socio-political tools, although participatory and context-sensitive, can lack comparability, strategic focus, or clear indicators to guide decision-making [Boni et al. 2023]. Generally, an integrated approach that combines the two perspectives and has the flexibility to adapt to different contexts could yield a more meaningful and holistic assessment of social impact. In practice, this often remains a challenge, and frequently no more than one or two tools are used in an evaluation process [Sadler et al. 2002].

It is increasingly recognized [Antadze & Westley 2012; Owen et al. 2022] that there is a need for a new approach in social impact measurement, in particular, one that is more participatory, contextual, and focused on understanding change from different stakeholders’ perspectives, as well as one that understands change as a complex and emergent process, not only as a monetary outcome, recognising social change as an uncertain, non-linear, and multi-dimensional phenomenon.

Table 2. Most frequently used social impact assessment tools in for-profit organizations. *Elaborated by the authors.*

<i>Tool</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Time frame</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Length of time frame</i>	<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Approach</i>
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Acumen Scorecard	Screening	Prospective	Input	Short Term	Meso (corporation)	Process methods
	Monitoring	Ongoing		Long Term		
	Reporting					
Atkinsson Compass Assessment for Investors (ACAFI)	Monitoring	Prospective	Input	Short Term	Micro (Individual)	Process methods
	Reporting	Ongoing		Long Term	Meso (corporation)	
Balanced Scorecard (BSc)	Screening	Prospective	Output	Short Term	Meso (corporation)	Impact methods
	Monitoring	Ongoing			Macro (society)	Process methods
	Reporting	Retrospective				
	Evaluation					
Best Available Charitable Option (BACO)	Screening	Prospective	Input	Short Term	Meso (corporation)	Process methods
	Monitoring	Ongoing			Macro (society)	Monetisation
	Reporting	Retrospective				
BoP Impact Assessment Framework	Screening	Prospective	Input	Short Term	Micro (Individual)	Process methods
	Monitoring	Ongoing			Macro (society)	Impact methods
	Reporting	Retrospective				
	Evaluation					
Center for High Impact Philanthropy Cost per Impact	Screening	Prospective	Input	Short Term	Micro (Individual)	Process methods
	Monitoring	Ongoing		Long Term	Macro (society)	
	Reporting					
	Evaluation					

Table 2 (continued).

<i>Tool</i>	<i>Data type</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Main objective</i>	<i>Complexity</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Source</i>
	7	8	9	10	11	12
Acumen Scorecard	Quantitative	Scorecard	Track and manage performance of social ventures across outcome milestones and strategic benchmarks.	Mid	2001	Acumen Fund and McKinsey (2001)
	Qualitative					
Atkinsson Compass Assessment for Investors (ACAFI)	Quantitative	Scorecard	Assess and communicate sustainability performance across five domains (Nature, Society, Economy, Well-being, and Synergy) in alignment with CSR and investment reporting standards.	High	2000	AtKisson Inc. (2000)
	Qualitative	Framework				
Balanced Scorecard (BSc)	Quantitative	Scorecard	Align organizational activities to the vision and strategy by measuring performance across financial, customer, internal process, and learning-growth dimensions.	High	1992	Kaplan, R., & Norton, D. (1992)
	Qualitative	Framework				
Best Available Charitable Option (BACO)	Quantitative	Comparative framework	Compare the projected social returns of an investment against the best available charitable alternative for the same social issue.	High	2006	Acumen Fund (2006)
BoP Impact Assessment Framework	Quantitative	Framework	Assess who is impacted by BoP ventures and how, by articulating well-being changes and supporting strategic decision-making and investment.	High	2007	Ted London (2007). William Davidson Institute.
	Qualitative					
Center for High Impact Philanthropy Cost per Impact	Quantitative	Ratio/ Indicator	Assess how much social good is achieved per dollar invested by evaluating both the cost and impact of philanthropic initiatives.	Mid	2007	University of Pennsylvania, Center for High Impact Philanthropy (2007)
		Framework				

While monetary outcomes are fundamental for organizations and are unavoidable to initiatives that are part of a larger system, for many purpose-driven enterprises, social organizations, and social innovators, it is critical to go beyond metrics and to highlight the relational aspects of social impact. Equally important is the follow-up process, where monitoring, learning, and adapting initiatives are critical to improving the effectiveness of the desired social impact.

Evaluation and assessment paradigm

Evaluation and assessment literature is still underexplored, presenting a lack of conceptualization and theory. The most-used tools for social impact measurement were not designed for that purpose, but rather for more traditional performance management or financial accounting and reporting, – they originated in conventional accounting practices [O’Flynn & Barnett 2017]. On this basis, the greater part of those methods and tools are unable to reflect the social impact and its value.

The needs around evaluation and assessment practices are diverse, and with tools that are not fully appropriate for this task, limitations, and challenges are frequent. The challenge of developing approaches in line with social impact, social innovation needs and characteristics is continuously growing, becoming the current focuses adopted by organizations in social phenomena and contexts. The recent surge of interest in social reporting has raised the number of policymakers involved in the process, but this has not yet translated into a significant focus on developing evaluation frameworks that could adequately capture and represent the nuanced changes occurring at the social level [Gray et al. 1988; Raucci & Tarquinio 2020]. Furthermore, the tendency to attribute monetary values to *soft* outcomes is leaving unresolved many concerns about the appropriateness and feasibility of most tools used in the short term.

A missed opportunity in the topic is related to the ways how these tools behave around innovation possibilities, offering little (if any) insights into the conditions that are leading to the success or failure of initiatives, and the processes behind them, results, and data that could help organizations and individuals in general to learn, improve and take the required measures. Softer and contextual data are absent from any assessment, analysis, or prioritization.

As the purely summative evaluation-related approaches are falling short of the target [Impact House 2025], more profound research on conditions and contextualities of different effective social interventions and parameters is becoming crucial to foster a more tailored approach to the development of social impact assessment tools. New evaluation models that are breaking with traditional impact assessment structures are not only incorporating economic, environmental, and social considerations but also observing the inherent dynamics of social innovation

as nonlinear, uncertain, and unpredictable phenomena that need to be understood as a process instead of a one-time outcome [Antadze and Westley 2012].

2. Alternative approaches to social impact assessment

Evaluation and assessment require other than financial indicators and perspectives, it should be a comprehensive analysis and process in line with the non-existent standard for social impact measurement [GECES 2014]. Since it is neither possible nor desirable to establish rigid indicators and ‘one-size-fits-all’ measures for social impact, introducing pre-determined, highly quantitative measures risks organizations to maximize their own performance rather than actually maximizing their social impact [Boni et al. 2023].

Given the wide diversity of impacts, qualitative aspects are underrepresented when relying heavily only on quantitative indicators. The process of measuring social innovation and impact needs flexible, participatory, creative models that are contextually appropriate and that spark reflectivity around the mechanisms, strategies, and ways of maximizing the effectiveness of social initiatives.

On this basis, adaptive assessment approaches (Table 3), such as creative evaluation and participatory evaluation, are increasingly being adopted for assessment

Table 3. Evaluation typologies favouring adaptive approaches.

Elaborated by the authors.

<i>Empowerment Evaluation</i>	<i>Evaluate through stakeholder empowerment</i>	<i>Builds capacity in stakeholders</i>	<i>Requires high stakeholder involvement</i>	<i>Fetterman (1994)</i>
Feminist Evaluation	Evaluate with a focus on gender and power imbalances	Focus on inclusivity and gender issues	May not always be applicable to all evaluation settings	Podems (2010)
Creative Evaluation (CE)	Apply creative methods in evaluation processes	Increases engagement and innovative thinking	Often lacks standardized methods	Patton (1981)
Collaborative Evaluation	Engage multiple stakeholders to create collective knowledge	Inclusive and builds stakeholder relations	Hard to manage with large groups	Cousins & Earl (1992)
Sustainability-Ready Evaluation	Evaluate projects with sustainability metrics	Focused on long-term environmental and social outcomes	May not capture short-term business outcomes	Fitzpatrick (2012)

purposes in fields like social sciences and the arts, presenting an opportunity for investigating social value in a broader context [Manohar et al. 2016]. Creative evaluation presents itself as a synthesis of evaluative methodologies that employ creative thinking, tools, and techniques to generate diverse perspectives, knowledge, and comprehension. As indicated in Table 2, less rigid frameworks are constantly emerging from practitioners in the area, academics, and individuals engaged in social practices in search of evaluating and monitoring the expected impacts of larger organizations or community-based initiatives.

This shift in the evaluation landscape has also been driven by funders, who are increasingly open to more participatory and qualitative assessment methods, as a result of frustration with the lack of meaningful data from more conventional quantitative impact measurement approaches. This opens up space for considering fewer tangible forms of value creation and offers a distinct and holistic approach to examining and articulating the various forms of value produced by social innovation initiatives, extending beyond just economic advantages [Owen et al. 2022].

In participatory approaches to assessment, evaluation is not something that is ‘done to’ an initiative or a focus group, rather, it represents a collaborative, mutually beneficial shared process. By involving the community, stakeholders, and participants directly in the evaluation of an initiative developed by any organization, the assessment process itself can become a vehicle for learning, reflection, and the co-creation of knowledge. Approaches to evaluation, as reflected in Table 3, such as participatory evaluation, collaborative evaluation, empowerment evaluation, inclusive evaluation, developmental evaluation, democratic evaluation, post-normal evaluation and learning evaluation, feminist evaluation, and sustainability-ready evaluation, are just a few examples of contextual evaluation needs [Christou et al. 2021].

3. The need for creativity and participation in assessment and evaluation processes

Applying creativity to evaluation processes is important when considering how practices have evolved to respond to contextual circumstances. Transdisciplinary nature of evaluation has evolved and fragmented in approaches, methods, theories, becoming more and more diverse [Patton 2002]. As increasingly more diverse actors are involved in evaluation practices, from the public sector to private companies, the evaluation has, likewise, been adopting practices from diverse disciplines by borrowing from strategic management, education, health, and design, presenting some common points in exploratory processes, co-design and co-creation approaches, emphasizing the need for involvement of various stakeholder groups in allowing a more holistic practice of evaluation.

Adaptability, flexibility, applicability, contextuality, receptiveness and multidisciplinary are key elements that make the plurality and diversity of evaluation methods, frameworks, theories, and practices a welcomed environment for participation and creativity [Christou et al. 2021]. Table 4 examines creative and participatory principles, which promote a learning, participative, inclusive and responsive environment for evaluation journeys. Creativity and evaluation are strongly linked by both aiming at discovery, generating new knowledge, and encouraging reflection. When applied to innovation, as a process immersed within a complex-multidimensional-uncertain system, it presents to be accurate as a strategy

Table 4. Principles of creative and participatory evaluation. *Elaborated by the authors.*

<i>Creative & participatory evaluation principles</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Promoting</i>	
Inter/Cross/Multi/Transdisciplinarity	Utilising tools, methods, and methodologies across sectors/philosophies producing methodologies, methods and tools that can be applied across disciplines.	Learning	New opportunities for learning and new knowledge to emerge.
Context Specificity	Creating evaluation designs that are relevant and responsive to the context they are conducted in.	Collaborative Participation	Working together with team members, participants, stakeholders and communities from developing ideas to actions and objectives.
Receptiveness	Open and responsive to ideas, impressions and suggestions.	Inclusivity	Aiming to increase participation of different stakeholder groups and address any imbalances in power dynamics.
Pluralism	Recognising and seeking contributions from more than one voices/sources and the sharing of power amongst participants/actors.	Responsiveness	Actively making changes in light of emergent information.
		Reciprocity	Exchanging knowledge, resources and participation for mutual benefit.

for its assessment, not being easily captured through more conventional approaches [Milbergs & Vonortas, 2004].

Social innovation and social impact demand a relationship between complex and abstract phenomena, social processes, and multiple outcomes. Evaluation enhances innovation processes, especially when dealing with social innovation. Evaluation and assessment practices for social impact need to implement characteristics that are able to fully represent the value behind the object of study, demanding an inclusive, creative, flexible, collaborative, relationship-building, and transformative approach.

4. On-development evaluation framework for social innovation impact

Based on preliminary findings from the literature review, this paper presents an on-development evaluation framework for social impact to be applied in small and medium, purpose and socially driven, organizations (Table 5). This framework is based on principles, stages and evidence collection tools recovered from creative and participatory approaches, and was conceived as a conceptual structure that guides practice, informs theory, and shapes evaluation, could vary depending on the practitioner's goals and intentions and often rely on the developed framework methodologies and tools that influence how the framework is used and adapted [Edmonds & Candy 2010].

In the present framework, evaluation practice aims not only to look at the final outcome (achieving goals), but also at which tools and approaches have been most effective (what worked, what did not, how efficient they were), as well as the softer, more qualitative elements, such as the benefits of increased trust, collaboration, and participation, also considering the process of incremental change (how this occurred), focusing on adopting a creative and participatory approach to develop evaluation instruments.

Aiming at developing evaluation processes that are more engaging, so that participants can actively participate in the evaluation, the research proposes six stages of evaluation, – not as an audit process, but rather as a learning process that informs future improvements. This evaluation framework emerged from a thorough review of existing social impact assessment tools mentioned above, and their application in various contexts.

The evaluation framework is structured into six phases with specific objectives and proposed methods, and tools to guide the process of implementing and evaluating social innovation initiatives.

The **exploratory mapping phase** aims to identify key areas, initiatives, and projects within the organization and its broader context that could benefit from a social innovation approach. This phase employs participatory workshops with

Table 5. On-development evaluation for social innovation impact.*Elaborated by the authors.*

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Evidence Collection</i>
1. Exploratory Mapping	Identify key areas for design-based social innovation within the company.	- Opportunity Identification	- Co-creation workshops with employees and managers
		- Stakeholder Mapping	- Stakeholder maps and resource analysis
		- Capacity Diagnosis	
2. Strategic Co-Design	Develop and co-design strategies that integrate design into social innovation.	- Creative Solution Generation	- Documentation of co-design sessions
		- Implementation Planning	- Prototypes and conceptual models of design solutions for the company
		- Strategic Alliances	
3. Change Activation	Implement the co-designed strategies and solutions to activate change within the company.	- Change in Internal Operations	- Observation of new practices
		- Adoption of New Social Practices	- Satisfaction surveys and staff acceptance
		- Training and Capacity Building	
4. Mid-Term Impact Evaluation	Conduct an intermediate evaluation of the impact, focusing on qualitative impact and stakeholder feedback.	- Effectiveness of Solutions	- Qualitative interviews and focus groups
		- Stakeholder Feedback	- Case studies of implemented solutions and their effects
		- Behavioral and Cultural Shifts	
5. Sustainability & Scaling	Assess the long-term sustainability and explore the potential scalability of the initiatives.	- Long-Term Sustainability	- Longitudinal analysis of social impact
		- Scalability	- Progress reports on replicability and scalability of initiatives
		- Continued Community Impact	
6. Organizational Learning & Reflection	Foster continuous learning within the company and ensure lessons learned are applied.	- Strengthened Internal Capabilities	- Interviews with management and staff
		- Ongoing Feedback	- Qualitative assessments of organizational and cultural change
		- Cultural Evolution	

employees and key actors inside the organization, along with activities related to stakeholder mapping and resource analysis, to explore the organization's capacity and identify opportunities for social innovation.

The second phase, **strategic co-design**, focuses on developing and co-designing strategies and solutions that integrate design participatory and creative perspectives into the company's social innovation practices. Through co-design sessions and prototyping, stakeholders collaborate to generate creative solutions and plan their implementation. Prototypes serve as practical tools to visualize how these innovations can be applied within the company's operations and planning. The goal of this phase is to ensure that the co-designed solutions are aligned with the company's needs and goals.

In the third phase, **change activation**, the solutions developed during the co-design process are prototyped to be implemented as a pilot, activating change within the company. This phase employs planning the implementation of training programmes, capacity-building initiatives, and related activities to equip staff to integrate social innovation initiatives into daily operations. Observation of new practices, satisfaction surveys, and creative materials towards the initiative evaluation helps monitor how these changes are being adopted and evaluate their effectiveness. The objective is to ensure that social innovation practices are integrated into the company's operations.

The fourth phase, **mid-term impact evaluation**, focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of the implemented design evaluation practices and adjusting strategies toward the improvement of the social innovation initiative as necessary. This phase will be evaluated by performing qualitative interviews to get a first-hand view of the effectiveness perceived of the implemented initiatives; and through case studies, where a complete analysis and documentation of the initiatives are revised if more than one initiative. This phase also focuses on gathering feedback from stakeholders so the company can clearly see the impact of the initiatives. This phase is critical for understanding whether the solutions are generating the desired social impacts and identifying areas for improvement.

In the fifth phase, **sustainability and scaling**, the long-term sustainability of the implemented innovations is evaluated, and the potential for scaling these practices to other areas is explored. Through participative longitudinal analysis, observation, and scalability assessments and planning, the company can evaluate whether the initiatives are not only effective in the short term but also capable of being replicated or expanded. Collaborative progress reports will be provided to document the outcomes and insights into the scalability of the initiatives.

The sixth phase, **organizational learning & reflection**, fosters a culture of continuous learning and initiative evaluation within the company. Through

interviews, qualitative assessments, and ongoing feedback participative formats, the company documents lessons learned and apply them to future social innovation projects. This phase ensures that the company strengthens its internal capabilities and embraces a culture of social innovation and constant evaluation of initiatives, taking a participative and creative approach. By fostering continuous learning and reflection, the evaluation framework helps organizations sustain long-term social impact, scalability, and evaluation of their innovation initiatives.

Following the framework process, the initial prototypes were developed to support the application of the framework, serving as a foundation for preliminary interviews and workshops. These prototypes aim to explore key themes related to monitoring social innovation initiatives and identify participatory evaluation design possibilities. The application of the prototype aims to provide valuable feedback that will refine the framework and tools further. Participatory sessions aim not only to validate the evaluation processes but also to engage organizations in co-creating methods that suit their specific needs for social innovation evaluation.

This process is still under development and refinement by the authors, members of Polimi DESIS Lab, the research lab at Politecnico di Milano working on design for social innovation and sustainability and is in course of preliminary testing on 10 purpose-driven organizations in Italy on the course of 2025. The application of the framework is expected to provide promising results in terms of bridging the gaps separating the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of social innovation, as well as social impact initiatives.

Conclusion

This paper offered examination of the limitations of traditional social impact assessment frameworks and highlighted the increasing need for more participatory, adaptive, and context-sensitive approaches. Conventional evaluation models, shaped largely by rational-scientific methodologies, prioritize quantifiable metrics and financial indicators, rendering them inaccessible and often inadequate for smaller organizations, purpose-driven enterprises, and initiatives operating within social innovation ecosystems. While these methods provide structured means of measurement, they tend to oversimplify the complexities of social impact, failing to capture emergent, relational, and systemic changes that play a fundamental role in social transformation.

In response to these challenges, this study proposes a new evaluation framework that integrates the insights from participatory and creative evaluation methodologies. Unlike traditional frameworks that emphasize rigid quantitative indicators, the proposed model offers a structured, yet flexible approach designed to accommodate the diverse needs of small organizations and social enterprises. By

embedding participatory evaluation methods, qualitative assessments, and iterative learning processes, the framework positions impact assessment as a continuous process of reflection and adaptation rather than a one-time measurement exercise.

The framework, by incorporating participatory co-design sessions, qualitative narratives, stakeholder reflections, and iterative adaptation, aims to foster a more holistic and actionable understanding of social impact. This shift in evaluation methodology is particularly relevant for social innovation initiatives, where the value generated often extends beyond immediate and quantifiable outcomes to include process-oriented transformations such as changes in organizational culture, stakeholder empowerment, and long-term systemic change.

The findings of this paper contribute to the ongoing discourse on impact assessment by bridging the gap between theory and practice. The paper reflects on the argument that participatory and creative evaluation methodologies serve as viable alternatives to conventional assessment models, particularly in contexts where social change is complex, nonlinear, and embedded within broader ecosystems of transformation.

This paper presents certain limitations. The proposed framework, while theoretically grounded, requires empirical validation through further application in real-world settings. Future research should focus on piloting and refining the framework across different organizational contexts, exploring the scalability of participatory evaluation methods. Additionally, further studies could examine the ways how participatory impact assessment can be effectively integrated into policy-making processes and funding structures, ensuring that evaluation practices align with the realities and needs of organizations engaged in social innovation.

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