



Impacts of Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (MSP)

How to better understand, capture and communicate the impacts of MSPs

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Introduction

Multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) can contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), since diverse stakeholders from business, government, civil society and academia cooperate in order to achieve shared goals and create transformative change. Yet it is challenging to track the exact value-added of working in an MSP: what was achieved at all, better or faster due to the cooperation?

The **impact** of an MSP refers to its contribution to create lasting change for addressing a pressing problem. Impacts can be planned or unplanned, positive or negative and can appear in the short, medium or long-term. They are directly or indirectly related to the activities of the MSP. Adequately capturing MSP impacts proves to be challenging, as MSP practitioners have realized and as academic publications have concluded. MSPs sometimes focus on tracking outputs and immediate outcomes rather than longer-term impact. For example, an MSP may track the number of workshops and publications or an increase in skills or awareness of a certain group of people, without knowing the impact of these outputs and outcomes.

Another challenge is **attribution**: the question of the causal relationship between the activities of an MSP and the intended or realised impact. Ideally, a logical description of the cause-effect relationship, including all intermediate results, is required. That would require a lot of time, effort, expertise, and suitable methods such as process tracing. However, most MSPs do not have sufficient capacity to do so and it is questionable whether it would be worthwhile in terms of a cost-benefit-analysis. Alternatively, measuring can focus on the **contribution** of an MSP to desired change, so a plausible narrative how the MSP activities and outcomes have contributed to the desired impact, without necessarily fully proving a direct causal relationship.

There are three phases for MSPs to better **understand, capture and communicate** their impact. First, an MSP needs to be clear about its intended impact: which goals (or intended impact) do the partners explicitly agree on? Second, the partners formulate the impact narrative of the MSP to clarify how they plan to achieve the desired impact. Third, the impact can be captured and communicated, including the added value created by collaborating in an MSP.



This paper is tailored towards practitioners and provides a guide on how to better understand, capture and communicate the impacts of MSPs by offering information and tools.



Action Research project

Partnerships2030 and the Partnerships Resource Centre (PrC) together with nine MSPs¹ conducted an action research project between 2020 and 2022. The objective was to develop actionable knowledge that can directly help MSPs to better monitor, enhance and communicate their impact. Through a co-creation process, which is inherent to the action research approach, MSPs were guided through a learning trajectory with two phases bridging the gap between theory and practice. The first phase put emphasis on developing a better understanding of MSP impact,

while the second phase shifted the focus towards capturing the MSP impact at partnership level. Through tailor-made processes each participating MSP received active support by the research team to further enhance their monitoring and capturing of impacts, including the development of a set of indicators for measuring impact at partnership level. The results of the action research are summarized in this paper, so that other MSPs may apply the learnings and tools. You can watch videos about the first and second phases [here](#).

¹ Alliance for Integrity, German Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (D-EITI), German Initiative on Sustainable Cocoa (GISCO), Improving nonacademic training in pharmacy (ITRAP) in Tanzania, Land for Life in Liberia and Ethiopia (until February 2021), New Energy–New Opportunities for Sustainable Development of Donbas (until February 2021), PREVENT Waste Alliance, Sector Dialogue Automotive Industry (since May 2021), The Sustainable Tuna Partnership (STP) in the Philippines.

Intention: which impacts is an MSP aiming for?

MSPs unite diverse stakeholders with different positions, views and interests. An important first step to creating and tracking impact is discussing and agreeing on the shared impact intention of the partners. Jointly developing a common impact narrative helps to better understand each other and to establish a foundation for the collaboration. The collective process of developing an impact narrative supports relationship and trust

building between partners. This process is visualised as a hike through the mountains: you know roughly where you want to go, but the destination is often not quite clear yet, especially if it is the first time you walk this path together. Along the way, unexpected developments or events can make you deviate from the route, as the following visual shows.

INTENTION: HOW DOES AN MSP DEFINE IMPACT?

PERSPECTIVES ON MSP IMPACT WHICH ROUTE DO YOU TAKE?

I. ASSESS IMPACT ALONG THE WAY

STARTING POINT

MULTI-STAKEHOLDER
PARTNERSHIP
WITH A JOINT IMPACT INTENTION

BACKBONE
ORGANISATION

NGO

BUSINESS

GOVERNMENT



the paths are not
mutually exclusive

II. FOCUS ONLY ON THE END GOAL



Results
Peak

ALTERNATIVE
RESULTS PEAKS:
THE FINAL IMPACT
MIGHT CHANGE
ALONG THE WAY

Realisation: working with an impact narrative

Before or while making plans and implementing concrete activities, it is useful for an MSP to formulate and visualize an impact narrative. The impact narrative outlines how the MSP intends to work with their available resources towards an impact. It consists of an impact pathway with six steps divided into three spheres as well as five impact levels.

The **impact pathway** documents the six steps of the MSP from the inputs, via the activities, outputs and outcomes all the way to the impact. An impact pathway can be considered as a map, which shows how the hiking group (MSP partners) get to a certain destination (impact). It also shows the effectiveness of the route: are the intervention strategies really enabling the envisioned change? The impact pathway consists of the following **six steps**:

- 1. Inputs** or resources, which most often include financial, human, material and informational resources.
- 2. Activities and outputs** refer to actions taken, or work performed by an MSP, such as
 - services like trainings, workshops or roundtable discussions,
 - publications like guidelines or standards, or
 - collective action like pilot projects or lobby and advocacy activities.

- 3.** The resulting changes of these activities and outputs are considered as **immediate outcomes**. These are short-term results, such as an increase in awareness or knowledge, the development of an ability (for instance, facilitation or negotiation skills) or access to a group of people (such as to a business or government network).
- 4.** The subsequent **intermediate outcomes** involve changes that are expected as a logical consequence once the immediate outcomes have been achieved. These are mid-term results which are usually achieved towards the end of a project at the level of behaviour or practice change. It could be an organisation developing a sustainability strategy or companies working together to develop innovative ways of – for example – waste management.
- 5.** Such intermediate outcomes usually lead to **ultimate outcomes**: changes that are causing a lasting change of a situation, such as new policy or (area) regulations.
- 6.** Finally, the MSP aims to have **impact**, usually an intended contribution to desired lasting and inclusive system change.

It is worth noting that change rarely occurs in a linear process. It is rather achieved through iterative processes.

An additional level of analysis consists of three spheres: the **sphere of control, sphere of influence and sphere of interest**. The sphere of control concerns the operational environment, which the MSP can directly change through its actions. The sphere of influence refers to the environment that can be influenced to some extent, but over which the MSP does not have complete control. The sphere of interest has to do with social, economic and environmental conditions and trends that the MSP intends to change.

MSPs can have an impact at the **individual, organizational, partnership, sectoral and societal levels**. These levels of impact influence each other. The assumption is that when an MSP knows at what level it is aiming to create impact, it becomes easier to actually achieve and measure that particular impact.

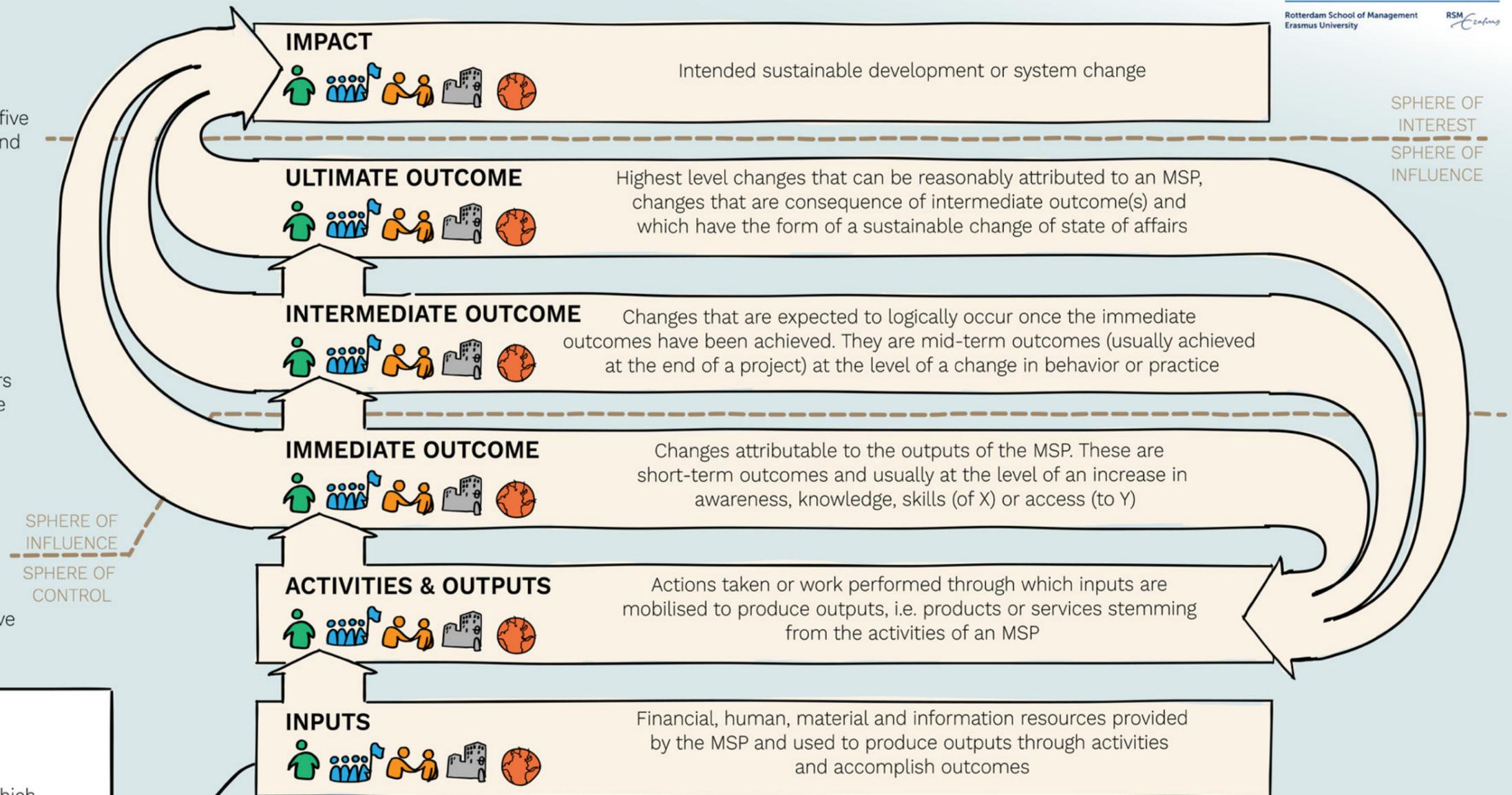
Together, the impact pathway, the impact levels and the spheres of influence create a (visual) narrative for identifying the intended impact. The narrative provides a compelling way of internal reflection on structures, processes and aims of the MSP, as well as resource allocation within the MSP. The narrative can function as a means of communication with internal and external stakeholders. Clarifying it at the beginning and revising it from time to time can help to avoid unscheduled, lengthy strategy discussions. Moreover, the impact narrative enables a broader, deeper understanding of not just what impact is intended, but also how the impact might occur.

REALISATION: IMPACT NARRATIVE

In capturing the impacts of an MSP, two elements can be distinguished: an **IMPACT PATHWAY** that documents the steps from activities and outputs through to impact and five **IMPACT LEVELS**, ranging from the individual and organizational to the societal level. Taken together, the impact pathway and the impact levels form a narrative of the MSP for establishing impact.

The following steps should be followed to determine the impact narrative of an MSP:

- I Fill in the impact pathway for the MSP, preferably together with the key partners of the MSP. It is advised to initially move from top (impact/s) to bottom (inputs).
- II In an iterative process go through the pathway and determine if causal links between entries at each stage can be established.
- III For each stage of the impact pathway, determine which impact levels are active at each stage and color accordingly.



IMPACT LEVELS

There are several levels through and in which impact can be achieved. These impact levels influence each other. This is also an iterative process. To show the links between impact pathway and impact levels, the applicable impact level icons can be encircled for each pathway stage.



- THE SPHERE OF CONTROL of an MSP concerns the operational environment, what the MSP can directly change by its actions.
- THE SPHERE OF INFLUENCE of an MSP refers to what can be impacted to some degree, but where the MSP cannot exercise full control.
- THE SPHERE OF INTEREST has to do with social, economic and environmental states and trends that the MSP tries to change.

for more info:
www.partnerships2030.org
www.rsm.nl/research/centres/prc/



Impact narrative and Theory of change

The impact narrative, which was developed in the action research behind this paper, has similarities and differences to a Theory of Change (ToC). A ToC is a comprehensive description and illustration of how and based on which assumptions a targeted change is expected to happen. Similarly, the impact narrative lays out how an MSP intends to move from activities towards an impact. The impact narrative includes levels at which the impact is intended to occur and does not explicitly and visually include the reasoning, assumptions and connections between the steps and levels. Compared to a ToC, an impact narrative is a more easily accessible tool which aims at capturing the complexity of MSPs in a readily understandable way.



Design your own impact narrative

To design your own MSP impact narrative, feel free to use the [Impact Narrative Visual and Tool](#). A workshop template to develop the impact narrative based on the tool can be accessed [here](#).

Capturing the impacts: focusing on the partnership level

As mentioned before, the MSP impact narrative helps to unpack and understand the often complex and by default fluid and uncertain path to impact. It needs to be operationalised to capture progress. Often, MSPs already have monitoring systems in place to capture their activities and outputs. However, measuring how working in an MSP contributes to realizing the intended impact is rarely adequately considered. To remedy that, it is helpful to explicitly consider the partnership level.

Operationalising the impact narrative at the partnership level consists of three steps:

1. Prioritizing the objective(s) at partnership level, developing relevant impact indicators for each objective and determining for each indicator the sources of information and methods for data collection,
2. Developing a measurement tool or integration of indicators into an existing tool, and
3. Measuring and making sense of the results.

This is an iterative process where the learnings should be continuously used to strengthen the capturing process and where the operationalisation should be adapted according to the changing needs and/or priorities of the MSP. While it is helpful for an MSP to operationalise the impact narrative early on, it can also be done at a later stage depending on the availability of the necessary resources and capacities.

It is helpful for MSPs to learn about and proof the added value of the collaborative approach in comparison to working separately. The **intended impact at the partnership level** links the activities of an MSP with the impact through a plausible chain of argument. This chain of argument outlines how the shared activities of partners in an MSP contribute to or are part of the impact. It is striking that most MSPs have similar ambitions: they want to improve the quality of the collaboration to strengthen the overall impact of the MSP.

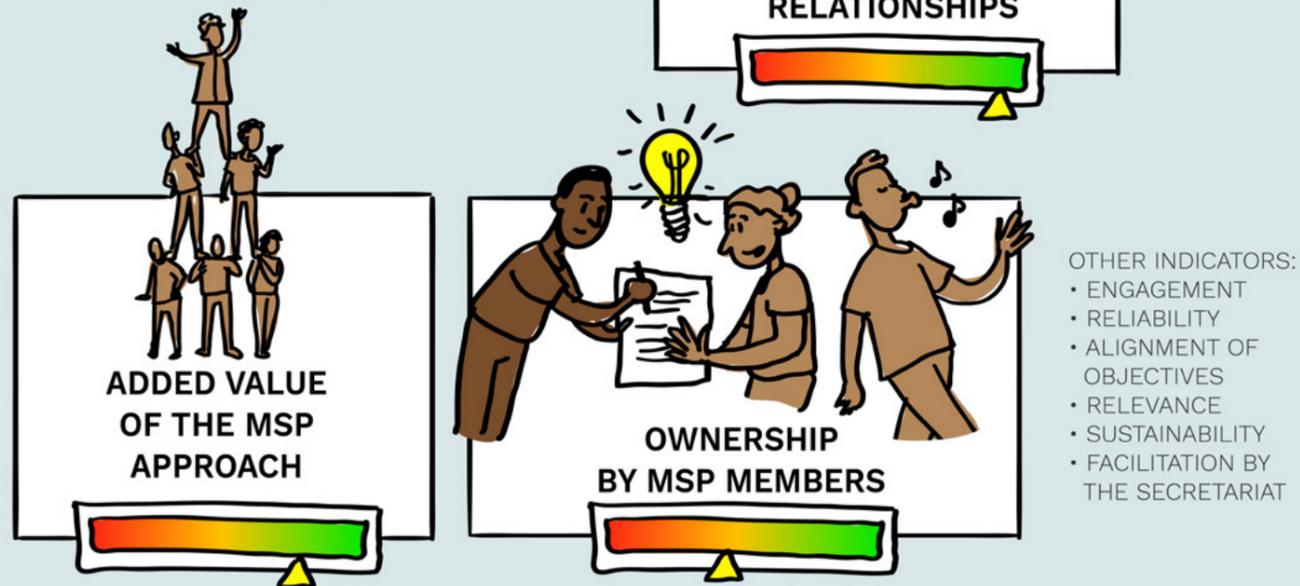
The intended impact(s) at partnership level need to be operationalized into indicators. Typical MSP partnership indicators include understanding & relationship between MSP members, ownership by MSP members, engagement/commitment, or relevance of the MSP. Improving on these indicators should result in strengthened impact at other impact levels (individual, organizational, sectoral or societal). Although the types of partnership indicators are similar for most MSPs, the way these indicators are operationalized in a specific MSP may differ. For example, MSPs may be used to a certain language and the indicators should be aligned to existing monitoring tools and approaches.

CAPTURING IMPACT AT THE PARTNERSHIP LEVEL

 This part will focus on the partnership impact level.

A PARTNERSHIP INDICATORS

As part of a measurement and evaluation system for MSPs it is possible to track whether working in a partnership is indeed contributing to the intended impact. The indicators used for this measurement are similar for most MSPs.



B HOW TO MEASURE PARTNERSHIP INDICATORS

Although the choice of partnership indicators is similar for most MSPs, the way the indicators are measured varies.

We call this the operationalisation and it depends on several factors. Two examples are given of how to measure partnership level indicators.



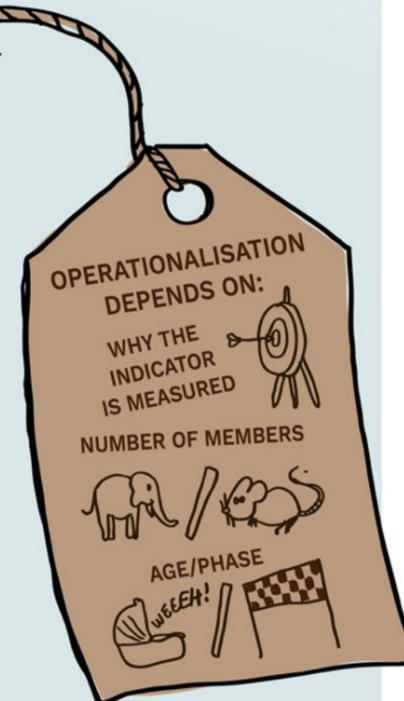
1: SURVEY

A survey can be conducted among a high number of members and stakeholders and it can measure their perception. The results can be quantitative or qualitative.

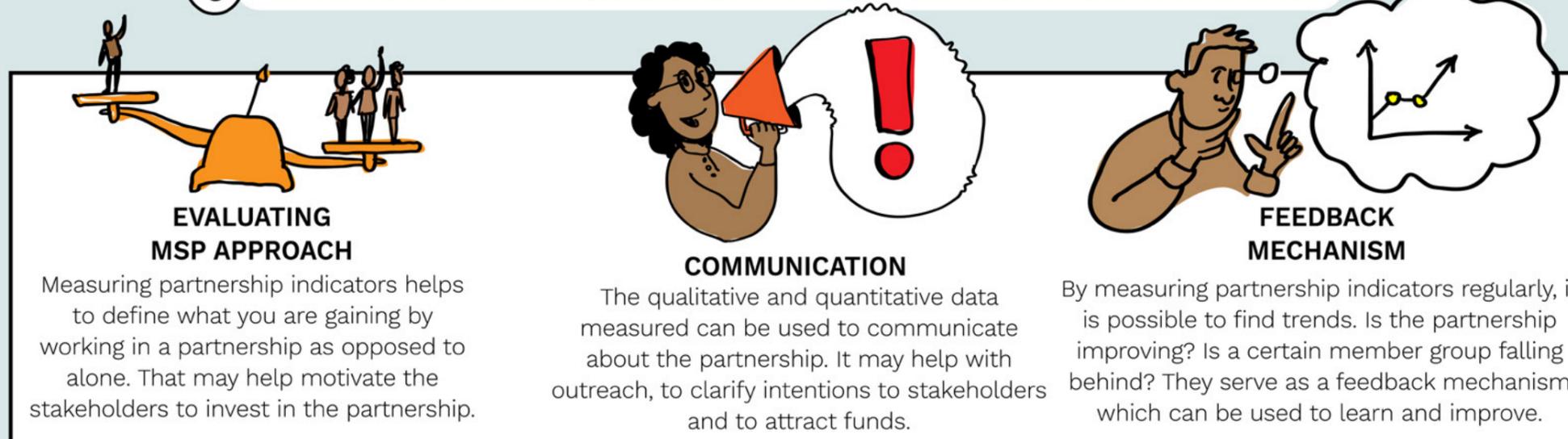


2: IMPACT STORY

An impact story is created by conducting extensive interviews with relatively few members. The findings are then combined into a coherent story. Although this is resource intensive, it is very useful for communication purposes.



C BENEFITS OF MEASURING PARTNERSHIP INDICATORS



ANY QUESTIONS?

Got inspired? Good! Partnerships2030 or the PrC can help you find the right approach to use for your partnership. We'd love to discuss your plans, just get in touch via:

www.partnerships2030.org
www.rsm.nl/research/centres/prc/

Generic **indicators and themes of relevance** for MSPs include:

Engagement of stakeholders	Alignment of objectives	Sustainability
Reliability	Relevance	Added value
Understanding & relationships	Facilitation / support by secretariat	Ownership

These generic indicators or themes are then adapted, further defined and operationalized to the specific needs and circumstances of an MSP. For more information and a list of possible indicators, feel free to contact Partnerships2030.

After the indicators are defined, ways for **measuring these indicators** need to be developed. Commonly used methods to collect data include surveys, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and observations. Other tools include more tailor-made partnership self-assessment tools and impact stories. Choosing the

most appropriate data collection method among other things depends on (1) the objective of the measurement, (2) which methods are already used by the MSP and (3) which capacities and expertise the MSP (secretariat) has to conduct the data collection.

Measuring impact at the partnership level often includes qualitative data collection that focuses on the perception of stakeholders as the main source of information. The focus with this type of information is not so much on causality but on plausibility, in order to close the narrative gap between the activities and the outcomes beyond the

sphere of control. Various ways for triangulation of data can be used (e.g. perception data with objective data).

After the analysis of the data, **sensemaking of the results** is essential. Sensemaking of and reflection on the results after each round of measurement is necessary for three reasons:

1. to improve MSP practices and to learn about their added value and impact based on evidence,
2. to consider which results need to be shared with whom for what purpose, and
3. to use the learnings to reflect on how to improve the monitoring process and tool after each application.

Creating and effectively working with an impact narrative entails an iterative process with continuous learning and will require periodical revision of the narrative.

Additional advice

Some insights and lessons learned emerged which can be helpful for MSPs to understand, capture and communicate their impacts.

Distinguishing internal and external impacts

A general distinction can be made between two interrelated impact orientations:

- External impact refers to thematic changes that the MSP aims to achieve at the target group, sectoral and societal level.
- Internal impact refers to processes and relational changes that occur between the individuals and organizations within the MSP and their cooperation.



Zooming in on monitoring tools: Survey and impact story

Survey: Member surveys can be an effective tool to capture perceptions or opinions. The advantage of a survey is that it can be conducted among a high number of members and that data can be either quantitative or qualitative, and when repeated on a regular basis, trends can be measured. Disadvantages of surveys are that the return rate may be low, and it can be challenging to learn more about why a certain result emerged from the respondents.

Impact story: An impact story is created by conducting extensive interviews with relatively few members. The findings are then combined into a coherent story, enriched with and checked against facts from other sources. Although this is resource and time intensive, it can be a useful communicative output because it provides in-depth insights on the value of the MSP in an easily accessible way.



Questions to guide the sensemaking process

1. Sensemaking within the secretariat / core team	2. Sensemaking with the stakeholders / members	3. Reflection on the monitoring approach / tool with suitable stakeholders
<p>What do the results mean for the MSP?</p> <p>What, if anything, is surprising to us in these results?</p> <p>What changes do we see compared to previous measurements?</p> <p>What do the results tell us?</p> <p>How can we explain the results?</p> <p>Do we need to check assumptions with our members / stakeholders?</p> <p>What do the results reveal about the selected indicators at partnership level?</p> <p>What, if anything, needs to be adapted in the MSP (strategy and activities) based on these results?</p>	<p>For whom are the results and learnings interesting and relevant?</p> <p>How to share the results and learnings with these stakeholders/ members?</p> <p>Are there consequences for stakeholders / members?</p> <p>How to engage the respective stakeholder (groups) / member(s) in the changes?</p>	<p>Did we gather relevant and useful information for learning and reporting?</p> <p>Do we need more / detailed insights on specific criteria? If yes, how to organize this?</p> <p>Is there a need to adapt the measurement approach/tool?</p> <p>How to improve the process of data collection, analysis and sense-making?</p>

To understand the full picture of an MSP and to be able to develop a plausible argument of its contribution towards the intended change, requires a comprehensive and connected understanding of an MSPs internal and external impacts. Thinking in terms of impact levels can help MSPs to create a clearer awareness of where impact is achieved (external or internal) and for whom, as well as the interconnections between external and internal impact.

Recognizing what the MSP can control and what it can influence

The step from ultimate outcome to impact is particularly challenging to prove. It is at best extremely difficult and resource intensive to attribute system change directly to the MSP based on concrete evidence and data and at worst it is impossible to do. Taking into account the spheres of control, influence and interest can aid MSPs to develop a plausible chain of argument for their contribution along the impact pathway at the various impact levels.

Balancing multiple and diverse interests in and capacities for impact monitoring

Involving diverse MSP stakeholders in the development of a joint impact understanding and impact monitoring can have significant benefits such as strengthening a shared sense of responsibility and ownership for the MSP. Furthermore, it is important to regularly update the joint impact understanding, especially when the composition of an MSP changes. The impact narrative can support MSP secretariats in engaging members on the topic in an easily accessible way.



Guiding questions for developing MSP monitoring approaches

1. Why monitor impact?	2. What to monitor and how to monitor?
<p>What are the reasons for monitoring impact?</p> <p>What are monitoring needs by partners / stakeholders /members / donors?</p> <p>For whom will the results be relevant?</p> <p>How will the results be used?</p>	<p>What is the intended impact that should be monitored?</p> <p>Which information does the MSP already have / capture in a regular way?</p> <p>Which indicators does the MSP need to monitor?</p> <p>How to collect and analyse data? Which tools are most useful?</p>
3. Whom to involve and when?	4. What to do with the results?
<p>Who should be involved (partners, members, stakeholders, donors) for which parts (developing the impact understanding, defining the monitoring objective, defining indicators, data collection, data analysis, sensemaking) in the monitoring process?</p> <p>Who should do the monitoring?</p> <p>What kind of expertise is required?</p> <p>How much time does it take?</p> <p>When is the right moment for monitoring?</p> <p>What is the ideal frequency?</p>	<p>What to do with the results?</p> <p>In what way to present the results?</p> <p>With whom to share the results?</p> <p>What to do with sensitive findings?</p> <p>How to use the lessons of this monitoring for improvement of the MSP and the future monitoring?</p>



Further Resources

Helpful further reading includes:

- [Impact Narrative of the Alliance for Integrity \(2022\)](#)
- [The SDG Partnership Guidebook: A Practical Guide to Building High-Impact Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for the Sustainable Development Goals – by The Partnering Initiative and UNDESA \(2020\)](#)
- [Impact and Impact Assessment of and in MSPs – by Partnerships2030 \(2018\)](#)

Additional resources available upon request include:

- List of possible indicators
- Longer list with further reading

Further practical tips and studies in relation to MSPs are available on our website: www.partnerships2030.org

Contact: info@partnerships2030.org

This document has been drawn up in cooperation with Marieke de Wal and Stella Pfisterer
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