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# Introduction

Since 1995, Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) has supported the voluntary and community sector to evidence the difference it is making. Over recent years, we have been developing an approach called *Measuring Change* which helps organisations and funders to capture outcomes.

*Measuring Change* provides a solution to outcomes measurement which is rigorous, straightforward and low cost. It enables funders and organisations to capture and use outcomes data to improve delivery, inform planning and make more effective use of resources.

*Measuring Change* has now been applied in a range of community settings to capture the difficult to measure outcomes of programmes designed to:

- Promote community renewal (Neighbourhood Renewal)
- Build community capacity (Belfast City Council)
- Promote community development infrastructure (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development)
- Improve community relations (Irish Football Association)
- Promote community well-being (Big Lottery Fund programmes)

This document describes *Measuring Change* - why it has been developed, what it does and how it works. We have also produced a series of case studies to demonstrate how the approach has been used in different contexts to **define** change outcomes, **capture** baseline data and **show** change over time.

Our work on *Measuring Change* has been both developmental and experimental. Practice to date has focused particularly on defining outcomes and capturing baseline data (essential to the measurement of change); further work will generate change data over time. The learning derived will inform the future application of the approach as well as contribute to a wider body of knowledge on evaluation and outcomes measurement.

*“There is a niche that Measuring Change fills - we are now into a new era of social impact measurement. The current debate is couched largely in economic terms - measuring the ‘value’ of services delivered. But we also need to be thinking about measuring the ‘change’ produced by community development activity - by defining change outcomes in advance, establishing baselines, and capturing progress over time.”*

# Measuring Change: Why is it important?

The current climate of austerity, coupled with increasing social need, places an even greater imperative on public funders to show the impact of their investments and for funded projects to evidence the outcomes of their activities.

The Concordat<sup>i</sup> and a recent Public Accounts Committee report on creating effective partnerships<sup>ii</sup> recommend that greater emphasis be given to evaluating and demonstrating the outcomes being delivered by the sector: *'It is important that Government and the Sector work collaboratively to develop output and outcome measures'*.

The focus on outcomes is not new and there has been a long history of efforts to grapple with the issue of outcome measurement. However, due to multiple factors this remains difficult.

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## Some challenges with measuring outcomes

- ▶ Outcomes are **complex**, tend to happen over the **long-term** and can be **expensive** to capture and measure.
  - ▶ This runs the risk of '**crowding out**' or diverting much-needed resources from service delivery or development work.
  - ▶ The outcomes of community development activity can be particularly **intangible** and **difficult to measure**.
  - ▶ Often, community-based funding programmes **do not set out clearly specified outcomes in advance**.
  - ▶ Public funders are necessarily concerned with protecting public money so monitoring and evaluation tends to focus on **compliance** and ensuring **financial probity** rather than capturing outcomes.
  - ▶ Projects are concerned with securing continued funding so project-commissioned evaluations can tend to focus on **PR** and generating 'good news stories'.
  - ▶ Often projects within the same funding programme use very different evaluation approaches, making it difficult to **compare outcomes** or **aggregate project outcomes** to show **programme impact**.
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# Measuring Change:

## An approach to capturing outcomes

The development of *Measuring Change* came from a need for an outcomes approach which was practical, low cost yet sufficiently rigorous to capture change resulting from investment in the voluntary and community sector.

### What is it?

A practical solution to capturing the 'hard to measure' qualitative difference that voluntary and community activity makes to people, organisations and communities.

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### What does it do?

It enables funders and projects to define change by specifying the differences they want to make in advance and then gather data to estimate progress made over time.

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### What does it involve?

Developing an overarching framework of high level outcomes and then applying an innovative method to enable projects to baseline and measure change against these outcomes.

### Where did it come from?

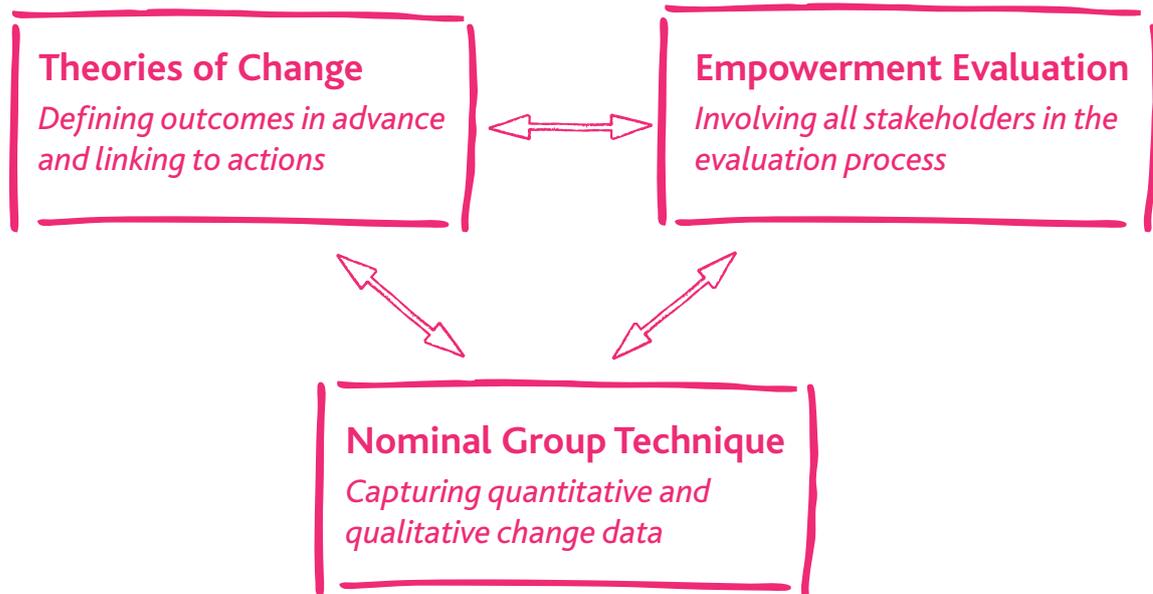
It has drawn on a number of sources from contemporary evaluation literature, synthesising components of 'Theories of Change', 'Empowerment Evaluation' and 'Nominal Group Technique'.

**Theories of Change:** This idea was developed to capture the activities of 'complex community initiatives'<sup>iii</sup>. It states that the understanding of the problem should define the nature of the intervention together with clearly defined activities and outcomes.

**Empowerment Evaluation<sup>iv</sup>:** Coupled with theories of change is the idea that participants should be the primary drivers of the evaluation process. This simultaneously generates better data, empowers those involved and creates an inbuilt mechanism for project improvement.

**Nominal Group Technique:** is a Treasury-endorsed method that can be used to capture the processes, reasoning and interactions that lead to change (Davies<sup>v</sup>, Patton<sup>vi</sup>, Popay and Williams<sup>vii</sup>). NGT is designed to draw on participant knowledge rather than opinions (the subject matter of focus groups).

## Measuring Change - A New Synthesis



The integration of these elements creates a hybrid methodology which is particularly appropriate for defining, capturing and showing the qualitative differences made by voluntary and community activity.

This hybrid provides a mechanism to build better collaboration between funders and projects on outcomes, which moves evaluation beyond counting activities to measuring change. The use of the Nominal Group Technique lends rigour by testing and 'triangulating' evidence from different perspectives, and can be replicated consistently and systematically across multiple projects. In a time of austerity this provides a relatively robust and low cost alternative to more traditional data collection methods.

Through *Measuring Change*, evaluation ceases to be just a 'test' of project performance against targets; it becomes more of a tool for learning and improvement. The funded project benefits from the learning and empowerment processes involved, while the funder gains better understanding about how projects contribute to programme goals.

# Measuring Change: How does it work?

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## 1 Define Change

What is the difference you want to make? **Outcomes**

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## 2 Capture Change

Facilitate stakeholder groups, drawing on their 'collective knowledge' to produce agreed 'estimates' of:

Where are they starting from? **Baseline**

What difference has been made? **Change**

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## 3 Show Change

Analysing these estimates to enable:

**Projects** to demonstrate progress made from their baseline

**Programme** to add project data together and indicate overall impact

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*Measuring Change* begins with defining the nature of change which the programme and its funded projects are trying to achieve.

## — Strategic Focus

The aim is to capture the difference made rather than count or describe project activities. The focus is on identifying high level outcomes for the programme against which the activities of diverse projects can be aligned. A review of programme and project documentation, combined with consultation with key stakeholders, helps to identify and draw out key outcome themes.

## — Theory of Change

Engaging with programme staff initially, this evolves through a process of clarifying - what is it that this programme is trying to achieve, how it intends to do this and what will be delivered in terms of specific outcomes.

## — Structure

Based on this, it is possible to:

- Clarify the **purpose** of the programme
- Identify key '**outcome themes**' in terms of differences made to people organisations and communities
- Develop specific **outcomes** and **indicators** against these themes
- Structure this into a detailed outcomes **framework**.

## — Stakeholder Involvement

Drafts of the framework may go through a series of iterative updates involving representatives from both the funding programme and funded projects. This collaboration helps to develop a common understanding and foster a shared ownership of the outcomes framework.

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## Claim or Blame?

The crucial element of *Measuring Change* is evolving a clear and agreed 'theory of change'. It is essential to be as focused as possible in specifying discrete and achievable outcomes in advance.

If a programme can specify its change outcomes at the start, then it can legitimately **claim** credit if they are achieved. If it does not specify what is realistic to achieve within the time and resources available, then stakeholders may hold unrealistic expectations and cast **blame** if these are not achieved.

**For example**, a funding programme aims to build community capacity in deprived areas; this is based on the assumption that building community capacity could contribute to the longer-term policy goal of alleviating deprivation. So, if the outcome for this programme's intervention is to build community capacity, then there is a need to:

- Define what is meant by community capacity
- Specify in advance the community capacity outcomes the programme wants to achieve; and
- Negotiate with funded projects what they can deliver against these outcomes over a defined time period with the resources available.

Otherwise there is a danger that the programme and funded projects could be judged in relation to the longer-term policy goal of alleviating deprivation, rather than the achievement of the specific programme outcomes of building capacity.

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*Measuring Change* uses a method known as 'Nominal Group Technique' to enable projects to establish a baseline against each outcome and then to estimate progress from that baseline position over time.

## — Multiple perspectives

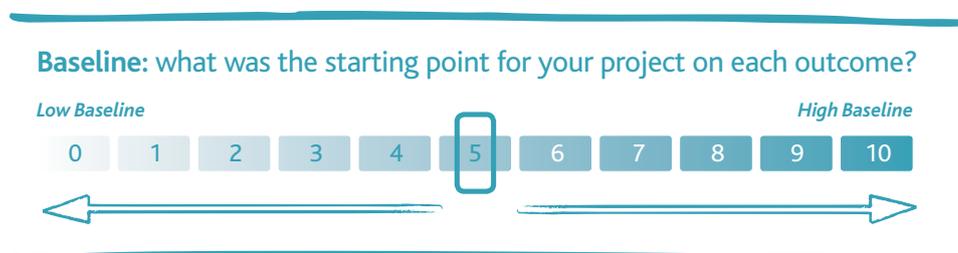
Representatives of the project partners, management, staff, volunteers, users and other relevant interests are brought together into an 'expert panel'. These are the people who can collectively provide an informed overview of the project - its formative issues and challenges, and its ongoing activities and achievements.

## — Facilitation

The facilitator's role is to act as a 'critical friend', drawing on each panel member's knowledge of the project, then testing and 'triangulating' the evidence from their differing perspectives.

## — Measurement

Through the facilitated debate, this knowledge is 'converted' into an agreed estimate of the starting point (baseline) for the project against each outcome using a 0-10 numerical scale.



This establishes a baseline or Time 1 position. At a later date (Time 2), the panel can re-convene to produce an updated estimate to indicate where they consider the project now scores against each outcome. Producing both Time 1 baseline position and Time 2 update estimates allows the project to demonstrate progress for each outcome over time.

These estimates are not precise measurements - the rating mechanism simply provides a means for the panel to reach consensus on where they estimate the project is at. However, they do provide a useful 'shorthand' indication of progress made or 'distance travelled' from an agreed starting point.

## — Narrative

The estimates represent only one part of the story of change. Equally important is the narrative behind the estimates – the context and rationale for the score agreed by the panel. Key points from the discussion and debate are recorded and used to support interpretation of the baseline and progress estimates.

# 3 Showing Change

Applied systematically across multiple projects operating within the same funding programme, *Measuring Change* produces a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data in a standardised format. The data can then be analysed in a variety of ways and used at both project and programme level.

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## Individual projects can...

- Demonstrate their baseline position against each outcome
- Indicate their estimated progress from the baseline on each outcome
- Draw on narrative data to tell the 'story' behind the change
- Evidence their contribution to achieving programme outcomes

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## Programme funders can...

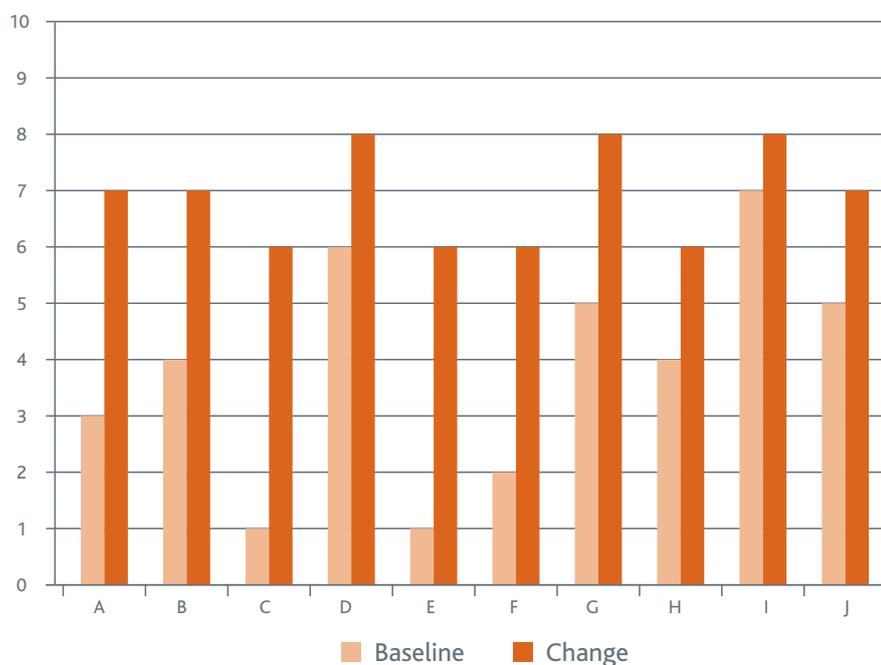
- Review projects' progress and achievements within a common framework of outcomes
  - Aggregate project data to provide some indication of programme impact across the different outcomes
  - Draw on narrative data to identify common themes and learning across diverse projects
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## An example...

This graph provides a simple illustration of how data generated through *Measuring Change* can be used to show baseline and change on a single outcome across a range of projects within a programme.

In this example, each project in the programme produced a baseline estimate for the outcome, 'improved partnership working'. They also produced an updated 'change' estimate approximately two years later.

### Projects' Baseline and Change Position on 'Improved Partnership Working'



The lighter shade shows each project's baseline position on the 0-10 scale and the darker shade shows the change position two years later. This gives a simple 'bird's eye' view of progress across projects over time on this one outcome. For instance, project 'C' started from a low baseline for partnership working and has made significant progress. On the other hand, project 'I' had a relatively high baseline and shows a smaller degree of change.

The narrative data can help explain the differentials between projects and to identify learning emerging from the programme overall – for example, in relation to some of the challenges involved in establishing structures and processes for partnership working.

# Measuring Change: Key benefits

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- Provides a relatively **robust** and **low cost** approach to outcome measurement at a time of financial austerity
  - Facilitates **collaboration** between funders and projects to identify and capture outcomes
  - Provides a **strategic focus**, enabling projects to align diverse activities against common programme outcomes
  - Supports critical peer review resulting in more realistic and honest evaluation which **informs learning** and improvement
  - Generates useful data to **inform decision-making** at project and programme level
  - Another 'tool in the box' to **complement other methods** and sources of data
  - Helps to shift focus of evaluation from **counting activities to 'measuring change'**
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# References

- i Concordat between the Voluntary & Community Sector and the Northern Ireland Government, Department of Social Development, 2011
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- iii See Anderson, A (2005). The community builder's approach to theory of change: A practical guide to theory and development. New York: The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change
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- v Cf. Davies, P T, 'Contributions From Qualitative Research' in Davies, H T O, Nutley, S M and Smith, PC (eds) What Works: Evidence Based Policy and Evidence Based Practice in Public Services, (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2000)
- vi Cf. Patton, M Q, Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods, 3rd ed, (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002)
- vii Cf. Popay, J and Williams, G, 'Qualitative Research and Evidence Based Healthcare', Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, 1998, Vol. 191, No. 35, pp 32-37

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