

## The history of social impact assessment

Social impact assessment has its roots in government measures designed to understand the impact of public service programs. Since the 1990s, venture philanthropists, foundations, high-performing nonprofits, and social investors have entered the assessment field, experimenting with a range of tools, frameworks, and best practices. Take a walk through six decades and see how social impact assessment has evolved, and what it suggests for the future.

# 1957

The foundation for social impact assessment is laid

Donald Campbell publishes his major work, *Factors Relevant to the Validity of Experiments in Social Settings*. This book introduced concepts that are now critically important components of social science methodology, including internal and external validity, experimental design, and quasi-experimental design.

# 1964

The U.S. government experiments with assessment

As part of the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty," the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) is created. A division within OEO, Research, Programming, Planning, & Evaluation (RPP&E), is asked to evaluate a "central component of systematic policy decision making, conducted by a separate analytically trained staff." RPP&E fosters the setting of standards and starts a dialogue around the importance of good assessment, but is shut down by the Nixon administration in 1969.

# 1968

**A large-scale field experiment uses a key assessment tool**

The OEO conducts a field experiment in New Jersey to test the real-world feasibility of a negative income tax. It is the first large-scale social science experiment in the U.S. to use randomized control trials, a method some in the field consider a “gold standard” of assessment approaches.

# 1969

**The environmental field begins to embrace new standards of assessment**

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) is passed, setting up the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) and requiring all Federal agencies to examine the effect of legislation on the “human environment”—an important step in the adoption of assessment in the environmental field, but one that is limited by the vagueness of the term.

# 1973

**Guidelines emerge, and the term social impact assessment first appears**

The Council of the American Sociological Association (ASA) forms a committee to “develop guidelines for sociological contributions to environmental impact statements.”

The term “social impact assessment” is first used by the Department of the Interior while preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

# 1974

**Interest in social impact spreads beyond the environmental field**

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corp (MDRC) is founded by the Ford Foundation and a group of federal agencies to enhance the effectiveness of social policies and programs. A year later, it conducts the first ever randomized control trial of a national employment program, the National Supported Work Demonstration. This large-scale effort catalyzes the use of random assignment in social research and the use of evaluative components for federal funding of social programs.

# 1978

**Social impact assessment is broadly adopted**

More detailed guidelines are established by the Council on Environmental Quality explicitly defining the social component of evaluations, mandating that “when an Environmental Impact Statement is prepared and economic or social and natural or physical environmental effects are interrelated, then the environmental impact statement will discuss all of these effects on the human environment.”

# 1983

**The U.S. government embraces assessment**

Most U.S. federal agencies have formalized environmental and social assessment procedures.

# 1986

The World Bank uses assessment

The World Bank includes social assessment in their project evaluation procedures.

# 1990

REDF brings assessment to philanthropy

Private equity manager George Roberts begins making strategic philanthropic investments in workforce and education programs in the San Francisco Bay Area, and uses tracked results to adjust and refine his strategy. This early social investing effort grows into the Roberts Enterprise Development Foundation or REDF. Today, REDF uses venture philanthropy practices to help nonprofits create job opportunities for poor and excluded people.

[Jed Emmerson on REDF](#) [TO COME]

# 1991

Randomized control trials increase in popularity

JobsPlus, a welfare-to-work program for individuals in public housing, creates an in-depth and rigorous program evaluation, using a randomized controlled design to track more than 5,000 people in six cities over 6 years.

# 1992

Standards are created to help organizations meet environmental assessment requirements mandated by law

The Interorganizational Committee on Guidelines and Principles for Social Impact Assessment is created to help federal agencies and other organizations meet assessment standards required by law, including the National Environmental Policy Act.

# 1996

"Social Return on Investment" offers a new way to assess social impact

REDF releases its first Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis, which measures the social value of its economic development initiatives in dollars. Later, REDF releases a specific methodology and reporting framework for SROI. While a number of organizations adopt SROI analysis, others express concern about reducing dynamic and complex human experience to a financial measure.

[Jed Emmerson on SROI](#) [TO COME}

# 1998

Foundations develop formal assessment approaches

W.K. Kellogg Foundation publishes its Evaluation Handbook, which provides a framework for planning, implementing, and utilizing the results of an evaluation. While prepared as an internal guide, the foundation makes the handbook publically available.

# 2000

**The Campbell Collaborative promotes randomized control trials as assessment's "gold standard"**

The Campbell Collaborative ("C2"), named in honor of Donald Campbell, is founded to produce systematic reviews of the effects of social interventions, including education, crime and justice, and social welfare. Along with other organizations, such as the Poverty Action Lab at MIT, which was founded in 2003, C2 becomes a strong proponent of randomized control trials in the growing debate over assessment best practices.

# 2001

**The constituent voice is heard**

Out of a series of meetings on new measurement and reporting practices for social change, the Aga Khan Foundation establishes an initiative "to increase significantly the quality and quantity of social investment for sustainable development by and for the world's poor." The initiative evolves into Keystone Accountability, which advocates for the use of the constituent voice as part of the assessment process.

# 2003

**Funders unite around assessment**

The Goldman Sachs Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation host more than fifty funders to discuss the issues surrounding assessing social impact and Social Return on Investment. Participants conclude that "there is tremendous interest in advancing the field of assessing social impact," and lay out four guiding principles for future work.

# 2007

## Development organizations make their voice heard on assessment

Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation (NONIE), a group representing more than 100 regional and global development organizations including the United Nations and the World Bank, is created. NONIE's draft mission statement emphasizes methodological diversity and warns against designating any one method a "gold standard."

# 2009

## The field continues to explore what constitutes best practice assessment

At the close of the first decade of the new millennium, the discussion over a one-size-fits-all approach to assessment is still ongoing. At a social impact conference in Cairo, a divide clearly emerges: some defend experimental design as the "gold standard" and believe thorough assessment should be the prerequisite for governmental funding of social sector programs. Others believe a mixed set of methods yields the most robust results, best suited to the ultimate goal of improving outcomes and empowering constituents.

The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Environmental Program publishes, "Doing Good Today and Better Tomorrow: A Roadmap to High-Impact Philanthropy through Outcome-Focused Grantmaking," which discusses the link between planning, implementation, and evaluation, and suggests improved portfolio evaluation techniques. More than 50 years after the publication of *Factors Relevant to the Validity of Experiments in Social Settings*, the discussion of how best to measure social impact continues.