Creating an impact assessment framework

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An impact assessment framework attempts to measure the change by evaluating the effects of the implemented interventions. This instrument enables policymakers, funders, and program designers to access substantial evidence of what works and how and what does not work and why in the world of youth employment programs. This Thinking Space paper explains how to build an impact assessment framework in the context of a project targeting NEETs.

An impact assessment framework requires that all partners within the program have a clear understanding of the terminology related to the evaluation of results, specifically:

- Inputs: the resources needed to realize activities
- Outputs: the direct objectively measurable results of activities
- Outcomes: the effects of the activities within the target group and preconditions to realize long-term goals
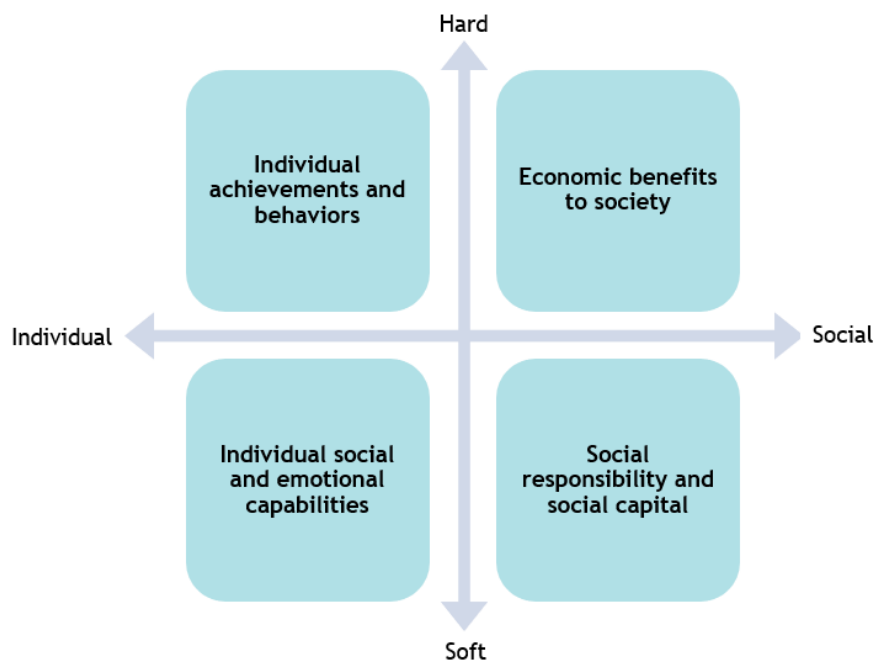- Impact: the societal effects

The measurement of inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impact relies on indicators, which are ways to quantify the change in phenomena or processes. Indicators should be based on validated scales that have been developed by researchers in the past and have demonstrated high validity and reliability by being able to capture the phenomenon of interest in similar contexts. Scales are composed of several items that cannot be easily modified without compromising their validity. An exhaustive assessment framework should comprise a four-layers evaluation and include input, output, outcome, and impact indicators. Additionally, internal quality indicators can be used to determine the quality of services provided and assess if variations in the results obtained can be attributed to changes in the quality of services available to the program's participants. Table 1 below shows examples of input and output indicators for a mentoring intervention offered to NEET youth.

Table 1. Potential input and output indicators of a mentoring intervention for NEETs. Source: Author.

Input indicators	Output indicators
• Cost of intervention (such as infrastructure, materials, paid staff, etc.) • Number of staff • Average experience of staff • Typical qualifications of staff	• Number of hours of mentoring delivered • Number of NEETs engaged in mentoring • Number of mentoring relationships established • Average duration of mentoring relationships

While the levels of inputs and outputs provide information on the project's cost-efficiency and can be reasonably easy to monitor, the assessment of outcomes and impact is usually more challenging. Drawing on the work by McNeil, Reeder & Rich (2012), we suggest the following conceptual framework to guide the choice of indicators for the assessment of outcomes and impact (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework guiding outcomes and impact assessment.
Source: adapted from McNeil, Reeder & Rich, 2012.

The two quadrants on the left-hand side of Figure 1 represent the outcomes (the effects of the program on the target group), while the two sections on the right-hand sight refer to the program's impact (the effects of the program on society). Figure 1 also distinguishes between "soft" and "hard" categories. While soft outcomes and impact are valued by and relate to participants to the program and rely on self-assessment measures, hard outcomes and impact can usually be measured more objectively by other people (researchers, trainers, etc.). Drawing on the conceptual framework described above, Table 2 below includes examples of what results could be measured to assess achievements connected to an intervention aimed at improving the employment situation of NEETs.

Table 2. Examples of results in the context of an intervention for NEETs.
Source: Author.

Outcomes	Individual social and emotional capabilities	Improves: • evaluations of self-belief (self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-confidence) • personal skills (creativity, cognitive flexibility) • attitudes (proactivity, optimism) • aspirations (job-search goals, entrepreneurial intentions)

Table 2. (continued)

Impact	Individual achievements and Individual behaviors	Improves: skills in literacy, numeracy, informatics, tax management, business management, CV writing, financial literacy, marketing and sales, foreign languages
	Economic benefits to society	• Diminishes: lifetime cost (decreased welfare dependence, increased contributions in the form of taxes) • Increases: consumption (through a rise in net disposable income)
	Social responsibility and social capital	• Increases: social responsibility, social relations, trust in people, acceptance of diversity, identification, trust in institutions, perception of fairness, neighborliness, solidarity, and helpfulness, respect for social rules, civic participation, socio-cultural participation, formal relations, volunteering, use of services, community engagement, electoral participation, charitable giving, etc. • Decreases: isolation, discrimination, offending behavior, etc.

Besides the choice of meaningful indicators, the focal point of a solid Theory of Change and impact assessment framework is the ability to establish clear links between activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact. Demonstrating those links can give programs' designers and implementers confidence in focusing on what they are trying to do and why. The use of research literature might be very effective in an attempt to make those links. Most current employment and entrepreneurship interventions targeting NEETs (including skills training, field-specific training, counseling or mentoring, entrepreneurial education and facilitation in access to finance) seem to rely, either implicitly or explicitly, on Social Cognitive Theory introduced as the Social Learning Theory by behavioral psychologist Albert Bandura in the 1960s.

The theory revolves around the concept of "self-efficacy." In general terms, Bandura defined self-efficacy as one's belief about the ability to execute a specific task (Bandura, 1977). Because self-efficacy beliefs "determine how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experience" (Bandura, 1977, p. 194), they have proven to be a reliable outcome measure when trying to predict an individual's behavior in several fields, including job-search, job performance, and entrepreneurial success.

Linking activities and outputs to outcomes

Because of its critical importance in organizing and guiding people's behaviors, self-efficacy should be a must-have outcome when trying to measure the success of interventions for NEETs. Self-efficacy also provides a robust justification for the implementation of activities such as training and mentoring schemes. Bandura and many other scholars after him provided evidence that self-efficacy can be developed through four primary sources of influence:

- Mastery experiences: mastering skills through hands-on experience
- Vicarious experiences: observing others achieve success
- Verbal persuasion: verbal encouragement from others
- Positive emotional and physiological states: reduction of stress and other negative emotions

Being aware of the research literature at the base of Social Learning Theory could help design interventions that explicitly draw upon one or more sources of self-efficacy. For example, Foundation Autoocupació in Spain developed a mentoring program, where experienced entrepreneurs and professionals share their experience for a year as volunteers to help young entrepreneurs to develop their competences for their business consolidation and growth. This type of intervention makes use of vicarious learning and verbal persuasion to support young aspiring entrepreneurs to achieve their goals.

Linking outputs to outcomes and impact

Because with high levels of self-efficacy, people are more willing to undertake challenges and sustain their behaviors despite setbacks; self-efficacy is often seen as a prerequisite for the implementation of a task (for example, learning a new skill). Specifically, self-efficacy may be considered "a multiplier, a skill that makes all other skills possible to learn and master" (Advani, 2017) and, therefore, generally, provides a reliable logical link between soft and hard outcomes as well as a connection between outcomes and impact. Self-efficacy has been linked to civic participation (Manganelli, Lucidi & Alivernini, 2014), and trust (Mishra, 1996; Whitener et al., 1998). Additionally, Fledderus, Brandsen & Honingh (2014) describe self-efficacy as a trust-building mechanism, which is the base of social capital.

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