METHODS
LAB

WHAT IS IMPACT?

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KEY MESSAGES

- Impact is a multi-dimensional concept. Some definitions focus on very precise understandings of impact, while others cast a much broader net.
- How impact is defined and used has a significant effect on the design, management and evaluation of development programmes.
- Development programmes should hold explicit conversations with different stakeholders about how impact is used and understood, in order to come to a shared understanding.
- There are six dimensions of impact that may help development programmes be clearer about what they mean.

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Contents

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Acronyms

3ie	International Initiative on Impact Evaluation
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
DFAT ODE	Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade Office of Development Effectiveness
DFID	UK Department for International Development
EC	European Commission
ECOWAS	The Economic Community Of West African States
EU	The European Union
G20	The Group of Twenty
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
JPAL	the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab
MDGs	the Millennium Development Goals
OECD DAC	Organisation for Economic Development, Development Assistance Committee
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDG	United Nations Development Group
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organisation

1. Introduction

'Impact: the action of one object coming forcibly into contact with one another; a marked effect or influence'

Oxford Dictionary

It seems everyone is looking to achieve and demonstrate impact. Private foundations talk of 'impact investing',[1] social change actors talk about 'collective impact'[2] and 'social impact',[3] academics are being asked about their 'research impact'.[4]

The international development community is also increasingly preoccupied with impact. Since the early 2000s, the terms 'impact' and 'impact evaluation' have skyrocketed in use[5] and have become common parlance among development practitioners and agencies.

The premise of this paper is that the way in which impact is framed has a significant influence on development processes and how programmes are designed, managed and evaluated. For example, the ways in which a programme is accountable for achieving intended impacts will affect the ambition of the design and how its success is ultimately judged. Currently there is too much ambiguity and confusion about what 'impact' is, how it should be defined, how to measure it and what kind of measurement is sufficient. Evaluation often serves as the process through which different definitions of impact surface, and sometimes very late in the programme lifecycle. However, questions of who is defining impact and how development is being judged are more fundamental matters that relate to, but are larger than, a single programme evaluation.

The purpose of this discussion paper is not to propose a single, universal definition of impact or to debate existing definitions. Instead, we examine how some definitions focus on very specific and precise understandings of impact while others cast an extremely broad net. We then wade into the murky middle between the two to explore ways in which ideas about impact can be contextually grounded and its scope bounded to make measurement feasible. We aim to elevate the discussion about impact, moving beyond the methodological debates that have dominated attention paid to impact so far, and present different perspectives and dimensions that can affect how impact could be framed and evaluated. Rather than arguing which definition is universally superior, we encourage development programmes to structure an explicit conversation about how different stakeholders conceive of and are using the term impact in order to come to a shared understanding.

The paper starts by looking at why impact is important in international development and how selected development agencies define the concept. Next, we present three ways to think about and approach discussions about impact: the impact possibility continuum, how the term impact is used in practice, and dimensions along which impact can vary, which affect what is asked, measured, when and how frequently, and how findings are interpreted.

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1   www.thegiin.org/cgi-bin/iowa/home/index.html

2   www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

3   http://socialvalueint.org

4   www.ref.ac.uk

5   A number of specialised groups and initiatives emerged around this time: the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (JPAL) in 2003, Center for Global Development's Evaluation Gap Working Group in 2004, International Initiative on Impact Evaluation (3ie) in 2008, Masters of Science in Impact Evaluation for International Development at the University of East Anglia, and the Centre for Development Impact at the Institute of Development Studies, among others. In 2012 DFID commissioned a study 'Broadening the range of designs and methods for impact evaluations' (Stern et al.). Cameron, Mishra and Brown (2015) document the dramatic increase of published impact evaluations as indexed and defined by 3ie as 'counterfactual-based programme evaluations that attempt to attribute specific outcomes to programmatic activities' (p.1) (a subset of the total, which would include other definitions of impact evaluation).

2. The importance of impact in international development

Development practitioners and agencies have long sought to achieve impact with their work; they are often highly and intrinsically motivated to create change. Measuring and demonstrating impact, however, has not always been high on the agenda. With hindsight, this may seem odd but for decades, development assessments were dominated by outputs – such as the number of trainings held or goods distributed. Showing you were doing what you promised you would was sufficient for funders, and impact was more or less presumed to follow.

The growing importance of demonstrating impact in international development over the past 10-15 years has been driven by a number of economic and political factors: recently there has been a reduction or retargeting of development budgets in many donor agencies. There has been a drive among major donors for greater demonstration of 'value for money' and wanting to get more 'bang for their buck'. At the same time, there is an increasing public perception that five decades of development assistance have not had effects as hoped. This perception has pressured donors to do a better job of demonstrating clear, tangible results that can be understood by the general public.

The evidence-based policy movement, which has gained momentum over the past few years, has led to more systematic examination of some of the main assumptions underlying development work. Together, these trends have led to much greater attention among development actors to measure and demonstrate what works more and less well, and to use this knowledge to leverage greater effectiveness from development programmes. Impact has become the watch word for this shift.

Impact is a concept that is used for many purposes and at all stages of development programming. In *planning* a programme, discussion about intended impact can be used to clarify a vision through which to build cooperation and coordinate action; assessments of potential impact are used to identify possible risks or adverse effects (i.e., environmental impact assessments); ambitions of impact are used to make decisions about which programmes to fund; they establish expectations of achievement by which success will be defined; and these in turn are used to plan appropriate inputs and strategy. *During or after* a programme, measurements of impact are used to determine to what extent the intervention achieved what it set out to achieve; determine other effects, positive or negative; decide whether to stop, continue, scale up, replicate or adapt the intervention; and to draw lessons for other similar interventions.

The way that impact is defined and understood, therefore, has widespread implications. It affects how a programme is perceived and how people will want to or are expected to be involved. It affects which programmes get funded and the level of risk a funder is willing to tolerate. It affects how programmes are designed, the strategies they take, and how ambitious they are. It affects the way in which programmes will be judged, who takes the credit and who takes the blame for particular outcomes. It affects what can be learned from one programme and applied to another. It affects the view of the world in which a programme operates.

Given the implications of different conceptions of impact, there is a strong imperative to be very clear about what we mean when we use this term and to use it carefully. But as we examine next, there is wide variation across the development sector in the definition and use of it, which contributes to confusion and, in some cases, conflict.

3. Who says what about impact?

Despite heightened attention paid to, expectations around, and use of the term impact, the development community does not have a shared definition of what constitutes impact.

Box 1 illustrates the diversity in how different development organisations define the concept. This list includes several large bilateral agencies, multilateral funds and programmes in the environmental, agriculture and health sectors, selected to demonstrate a cross section of agencies. The first two definitions from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) and the World Bank are the most commonly cited and in many ways represent opposite ends of the spectrum. The scope of the World Bank's definition is tightly bounded, 'the indicator of interest with and without the intervention: $Y_1 - Y_0$'. In contrast, OECD-DAC, echoed by several other agencies, takes a much broader approach: 'positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended' – a seemingly limitless definition.

Many development programmes likely fall between these two ends of the spectrum, with multiple intervention components and change pathways aimed at having an impact on more than a single indicator of interest, and operating within financial and time limitations that render measurement of all possible options and indicators infeasible. The scope of the definition of impact, and subsequent evaluations determining the extent to which they were achieved and why, must therefore be appropriately bounded.

Among researchers and evaluators in the international development community, discussion about impact has predominantly been methodological. Most evaluation scholars assert that programme theory and evaluation questions should drive the choice of methods and state the importance of considering a mixed methods approach. They differ, however, in the methods they consider to be sufficiently robust to be able to claim impact and in their relative emphasis of participatory, quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses (Chambers, Karlan, Ravallion and Rogers 2009, White 2009). There have been lively debates about the role of experimental and quasi-experimental methods to evaluate impact, alternative approaches to casual inference (many of which, it has been noted, have been infrequently or not applied in a development context), what constitutes attribution and contribution, the relative weight of internal and external validity, and consideration of implementation and programme theory failures as well as methodological ones (White 2010, Stame 2010, Stern et al. 2012, Befani, Ramalingam and Stern 2015).

The lack of a consistent definition and technical debates about methods have led to confusion among the donors and implementation staff we have interacted with, and trepidation that their understanding of impact is not the 'correct' interpretation. Moreover, these debates have focused attention on technical, methodological issues and shifted discussion away from relational and political matters. It is these latter questions – who is defining impact and how is development being judged – that this paper aims to make clear.

Table 1: Definitions of impact according to different international development organisations

Organisation	Definition
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC)[6], also used by the UK Department for International Development (DFID)[7]	'Positive and negative, primary and secondary long-term effects produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended'.
World Bank (as cited by White 2009)	'The difference in the indicator of interest (Y) with the intervention (Y_1) and without the intervention (Y_0). That is, impact = $Y_1 - Y_0$.'
International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)[8]	'How an intervention alters the state of the world. Impact evaluations typically focus on the effect of the intervention on the outcome for the beneficiary population.'
Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade Office of Development Effectiveness (DFAT ODE)[9]	'Impacts are positive or negative changes produced by a development intervention–directly or indirectly, intended or unintended–in the context of its environment, as it interacts with the multiple factors affecting development change.'
US Agency for International Development (USAID)[10]	'A results [sic] or effect that is caused by or attributable to a project or program. Impact is often used to refer to higher level effects of a program that occur in the medium or long term, and can be intended or unintended and positive or negative.'
European Commission (EC)[11]	'In an impact assessment process, the term impact describes all the changes which are expected to happen due to the implementation and application of a given policy option/intervention. Such impacts may occur over different timescales, affect different actors and be relevant at different scales (local, regional, national and EU). In an evaluation context, impact refers to the changes associated with a particular intervention which occur over the longer term.'
United Nations Development Group (UNDG)[12]	'Impact implies changes in people's lives. This might include changes in knowledge, skill, behaviour, health or living conditions for children, adults, families or communities. Such changes are positive or negative long term effects on identifiable population groups produced by a development intervention, directly or indirectly, intended or unintended. These effects can be economic, socio-cultural, institutional, environmental, technological or of other types. Positive impacts should have some relationship to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), internationally-agreed development goals, national development goals (as well as human rights as enshrined in constitutions), and national commitments to international conventions and treaties'.
Global Environment Facility (GEF)[13]	'A fundamental and durable change in the condition of people and their environment brought about by the project'
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)[14]	'The changes in the lives of rural people, as perceived by them and their partners at the time of evaluation, plus sustainability-enhancing change in their environment to which the project has contributed. Changes can be positive or negative, intended or unintended. In the logframe terminology these "perceived changes in the lives of the people" may correspond either to the purpose level or to the goal level of a project intervention.'
World Health Organisation (WHO)[15]	'Improved health outcomes achieved. The overall impact of the Organization sits at the highest level of the results chain, with eight impact goals. Outcomes can combine in different ways to contribute towards one or more impacts.'
Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)[16]	'The long-term, cumulative effect of programs/interventions over time on what they ultimately aim to change, such as a change in HIV infection, AIDS-related morbidity and mortality. Note: Impacts at a population-level are rarely attributable to a single program/intervention, but a specific program/intervention may, together with other programs/interventions, contribute to impacts on a population.'

6   OECD (2002). Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management. Available at: http://bit.ly/1KG9WUk

7   Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI). DFID's Approach to Delivering Impact: Terms of Reference. Available at: http://bit.ly/1noYc3e

8   3ie (2012). Impact Evaluation Glossary. Available at: http://bit.ly/1Urz3zU

9   AusAID Office of Development Effectiveness. 2012. Impact Evaluation: A Discussion Paper for AusAID Practitioners. Available at: http://bit.ly/1noYk2P

10 USAID (2009). Glossary of Evaluation Terms. Available at: http://1.usa.gov/1Tow8cN

11 European Commission. Glossary. Available at: http://bit.ly/2060g24

12 United Nations Development Group (2011). Results-Based Management Handbook. Available at: http://bit.ly/1nPVO65

13 Global Environment Facility (2009). The ROtI Handbook: Towards Enhancing The Impacts of Environmental Projects. Available at: http://bit.ly/1WOyXE1

14 International Fund for Agricultural Development. Glossary of M&E Concepts and Terms. Available at: http://bit.ly/1Towa4D

15 World Health Organisation. The results chain. Available at: http://bit.ly/1VsVAN4

16 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. Glossary: Monitoring and Evaluation Terms. Working draft. Available at: http://bit.ly/1ZTLy8M

4. How to make sense of the variations

Given the range and breadth of definitions, this paper suggests three ways to approach discussions of what constitutes impact. The first approach is to look across the definitions at what they suggest as different types of impact or possible places to look for it. The second is to examine the different ways in which the term impact is used in practice and the kinds of values that are implied in each use. The third is to consider different dimensions that vary across these different definitions and interventions, including the direction, subject and level of change, degrees of separation, timescale, rate and durability of change and homogeneity of benefits.

4.1 What kinds of impact are there?

From the broadest definition, as taken from the OECD-DAC, impact is seen to be intended or unintended, positive or negative. We can also infer that specific impact might have been foreseen ahead of time or unforeseen. This represents the realm of possibilities of the kinds of impact a programme might have. Table 2 shows the impact possibility continuum, which, assuming intended impacts are always positive,[17] yields six kinds of impact: planned programme goals, emergent programme goals, predictable (positive) spill-over effects, nice surprises, predictable risks or side-effects and nasty surprises (backlash, mishap or calamity).

Considering each of these possibilities can help to break down an all-encompassing definition. For example, if a programme is implemented according to a pre-planned design in a stable context following predictable strategies then a case may be made to limit the evaluation to foreseen, intended impacts only (top-left). This may not be the case, however, and it is likely that risks will be identified which will need to be monitored to asses if they were adequately managed (top-right). It is also likely, in many contexts, that unexpected things will happen outside control of the programme and the impact of these will also need to be assessed (bottom right and bottom middle). If a programme is likely to be adaptive and evolve over time, then evaluating based on initial goals will be insufficient and the evaluation will have to take into account emergent goals (bottom-left).

4.2 How is the term impact used in practice?

Beyond the official definitions used by development agencies, it is also important to consider how the term impact is used in practice by different stakeholders. Development practitioners may interpret medium-term outcomes, long-term outcomes and impact in quite different ways. We identify five main uses,[18] which overlap with the definitions above but which also include more utilitarian functions.

Table 2: Impact possibility continuum (adapted from Ling 2014) with examples from a job skills programme to reduce unemployment among young people in a rural district

|	Intended	Positive unintended	Negative unintended
Foreseen	**Planned programme goals**, e.g., decrease in unemployment rates	**Predicted spill over effects**, e.g., investment in local business increases	**Predicted risks or side-effects**, e.g., students from the programme migrate to find better jobs
Unforeseen	**Emergent programme goals**, e.g., during implementation, the programme realises the importance of increasing the diversification of products and income sources and adds this as a goal	**Nice surprise**, e.g., students from the programme start to mentor their siblings and peers	**Calamity, mishap or backlash**, e.g., youth not participating in the programme ostracise participating students and vandalise local businesses

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17 This assumption might be contested given that good intentions do not always yield positive effects, however, it is fair to assume that in international development, no programme sets out to achieve negative effects. Hence any negative effect, even if it is foreseen, is assumed to be unintended.

18 Thanks to Ricardo Wilson-Grau for inspiring this categorisation of definitions, shared through the Outcome Mapping Learning Community.

1. **Counterfactual use**. For many development economists (e.g., White 2010; Duflo, Glennerster and Kremer 2006; Ravallion 2008) impact is a technical term with a specific definition that requires comparison with a counterfactual: that is, what would have happened in the absence of the programme? (White 2010). For example, if an evaluation demonstrates that there was a significant increase in average agricultural yields in the intervention village when compared to a village with similar characteristics that did not receive the intervention, the impact attributed to the programme would be the difference between agricultural yields in the intervention and non-intervention sites (see Figure 1). This definition examines the extent to which an intervention caused a particular effect. It also narrows impact down to a measurable change in a pre-specified variable. In the definitions presented in section 3 (Table 1), USAID considers impact as results that are attributable to a programme. UNAIDS, on the other hand, notes that impacts at a population level are rarely attributable to a single programme or intervention.

2. **Boundless use**. As noted, the OECD-DAC definition is by far the broadest: positive and negative, primary and secondary, direct or indirect, intended or unintended. Using this definition to examine the impact of dam construction, for example, expands the potential scope of inquiry beyond agricultural yield to consider other primary effects such as energy generation and consistent water supply. Secondary effects may include decreased carbon dioxide emissions and better health and security for villages connected to electricity and water supplies. Negative effects may include displacement of people in nearby and downstream communities whose homes or farmland have been flooded, and effects on the ecosystem in the surrounding area and along the river valley to

Figure 1: Impact of a hypothetical intervention on agricultural yield
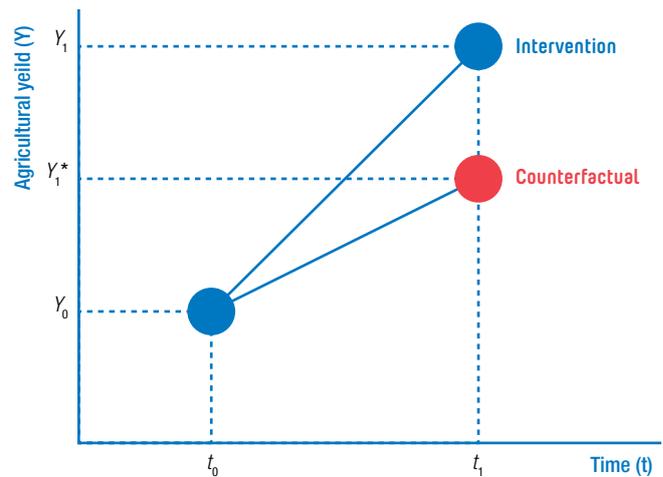
Note: The impact is the difference between Y_1 (intervention) and $Y_1{}^*$ (counterfactual) at time t_1 (adapted from Woolcock 2009)

the ocean (which may be another country). Figure 2 demonstrates the diversity of effects. When taken to its ultimate conclusion, this definition is unlimited in scope, allowing any and all effects to be considered, including spill-over effects. This very broad definition is flexible to accommodate all types of development programmes. In practice, programmes will have a core set of objectives they are aiming to achieve and, in order to measure impact in a systematic way, an operational definition would have to be developed to bound the scope of the inquiry into a more manageable size. Rather than identifying the cause of an effect, this definition considers all possible effects of a cause,[19] that is, the multiple effects of a programme or intervention.

Figure 2: Example of a network of hypothetical impacts from the construction of a dam
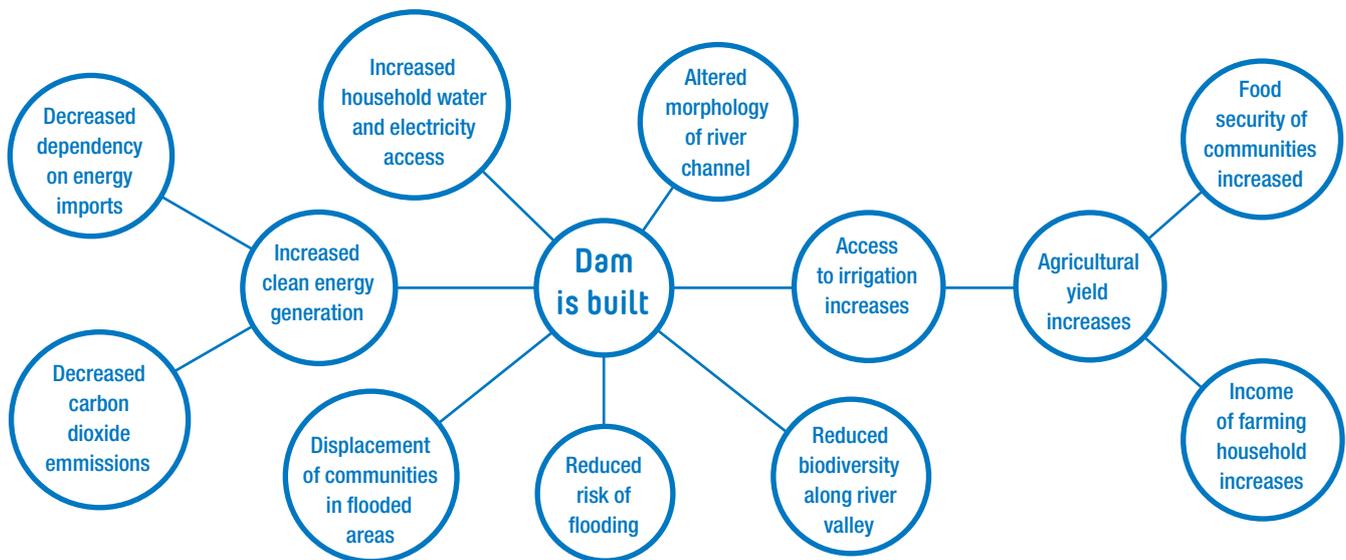
19 We thank Rick Davies for suggesting the distinctions between cause of an effect and effects of a cause.

3. **Results-chain use**. Many approaches to development planning, monitoring and evaluation use a results chain to illustrate the progression of levels of results from inputs to activities to outputs to outcomes and finally to impact (UNDG 2011). Logical frameworks – one of the most ubiquitous, yet hotly contested – management tools in international development, is based on this idea (DFID 2011). Results chains like this define impact implicitly in terms of its relation to other kinds of results, namely outputs, which are direct effects of the intervention, and outcomes, which are short and intermediate term changes. For example, the outputs of the dam project might be the completed dam. The outcomes you would expect from this would be that farmers will have increased access to water, will use more water and grow more crops. The ultimate impact of these changes may be that farmers earn more money, and they and nearby communities are healthier as a result of greater access to nutritious food (see for example figure 3).
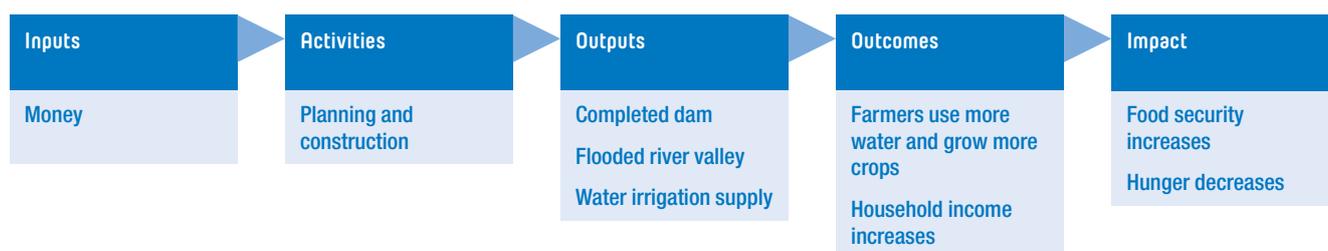
There are two common variations of the results-chain approach which are worth noting. Firstly, the theory of change approach allows complicated networks of results to be mapped visually, rather than reducing the logic to a single chain (Anderson, undated). Impact is sometimes used in this approach to mean the long term outcomes at the end of the network, although in many cases the term impact is not used.

Secondly, the spheres of influence approach, used in outcome mapping and elsewhere, incorporates concepts from systems thinking and places results in one of three 'spheres': the sphere of control, the sphere of direct influence and the sphere of indirect influence (sometimes termed concern or interest). Impact is defined in this framework as being the results that fall outside the sphere of direct influence (Montague et al. 2011). Therefore, it is beyond the control and influence of a particular development programme.

4. **Environmental sustainability use**. The advent of the Sustainable Development Goals has brought environmental sustainability more prominently into focus. If sustainable development is the ambition for all development interventions then the impact of these programmes should be framed in terms of how it is meeting this ambition. For example, a major unexpected impact of global economic development has been the rise in carbon dioxide levels and the resulting climate change. According to the recent international declaration, the world leaders committed to balancing the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental (UN 2015). In this view, impact is defined as the contribution to these goals, and needs to consider effects on the economy, the environment and social wellbeing. Among the agency definitions in section 3, and with the exception of the UN Development Group, Global Environment Facility and International Fund for Agricultural Development, all other current definitions do not explicitly consider the environment.

5. **Colloquial use.** Impact is often used in common language when talking about development interventions to mean the general effect of an action, as in 'the dam's construction had a huge impact on our family' or 'our event had little impact on the audience'. This use might be described as colloquial since it is rarely intended to be taken as an evidence-based judgement, and the effects that it is used to describe are extremely broad and varied. Included here is the use of impact as a vision statement to describe, in narrative form, the ideal situation which a programme aspires to bring about: 'all people will live free, healthy and prosperous lives'. In this form, impact is used interchangeably with other words such as result, outcome, effect and difference.[20]

Figure 3: Example results chain from the construction of a dam

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact
Money	Planning and construction	Completed dam Flooded river valley Water irrigation supply	Farmers use more water and grow more crops Household income increases	Food security increases Hunger decreases

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20 As in 'the new approach has made a big difference'.

4.3 How do characteristics of impact vary?

The definitions and uses of impact presented in this paper demonstrate that organisations and individuals have different interpretations of the term and value various aspects differently. In this section, we identify six dimensions of impact and pose guiding questions to help stakeholders clarify their interpretation and come to a shared understanding for a particular programme and context. Table 3 summarises the six dimensions and suggests more specific variations of each and their implications for measurement.

1. **Application.** Impact is a concept that is applied both prospectively and retrospectively. For example, in an environmental impact assessment, impact refers to the *potential effects* of an intervention on the environment and can be used to help decide whether or not to proceed with a planned course of action. In programme planning stages, impact can refer to the *intended or desirable effects*. In an impact evaluation, impact refers to *measured or observed effects* of an intervention, which could help decide whether to stop, continue, scale up or adapt the intervention.
   - Which application are you referring to when you use the term impact?

2. **Scope.** Impact can be defined in terms of very specific changes or it can be broad and open. Specific impact focuses on a fixed number of pre-defined variables, such as household income, disease status or air quality, and statements of impact discuss about impact according to these variables. Broad impact is not limited to pre-defined variables but considers as many changes as makes sense to make a useful judgement (and are feasible to measure), including variables that may not be foreseen.
   - Are you looking for impact on specific variables or will you include unintended or unforeseen effects?

3. **Subject and level of change.** Among the agency definitions in section 3, the UN, Global Environment Facility, International Fund for Agricultural Development, World Health Organisation, UNAIDS and 3ie refer to changes in people's lives. Yet development programmes are increasingly focused on more mezzo or macro levels, intervening with groups, institutions and policies, rather than or in addition to individuals. As mentioned above, several agencies also include the environment as a potential subject of change.
   - Where are you looking for impact?

4. **Degrees of separation** between intervention and impact, as illustrated through results chain or logic model, which is related to the subject and level of change. Interventions operate at different distances from individual beneficiaries. For example, there is a direct, immediate link between a programme providing bed nets or vaccinations and individual beneficiaries. In contrast, institutional capacity-building programmes have several degrees of separation between the intervention with staff and institutional policies and end users, such as patients attending health clinics. In the former, impact is relatively linear and the pathway is direct. In the latter, impact is more systemic; it confronts and converges with other factors (contextual or programmatic), which, like two waves meeting in the ocean, can either resonate and produce greater effects or they can disturb each other producing chaotic effects.
   - How direct is the causal chain? How far from the intervention do you expect to see impact?

5. **Immediacy, rate and durability of change**. Many agency definitions refer to long-term change. But how long is long-term? Different 'arenas of change' will have more or less rapid manifestations of impact. In some cases, impact may be more immediate – an accident caused by malpractice in an infrastructure programme can have very direct and immediate consequences for those involved. A conflict prevention programme, on the other hand, may take years or decades to have an appreciative and observable effect. In addition to the length of time, impact may not be static; assessments of impact may come back with different results at different times. A vaccine may provide immunity for life. Information and education cannot be subsequently unknown or unlearned. In unstable environments, however, hard-won successes can quickly unfold and the situation can change very quickly.
   - How soon are changes likely to manifest? Are they permanent or temporary? How variable is impact likely to be over time?

6. **Homogeneity of benefits**. Impact can be measured as an average effect across a population. Or, it can consider positive and negative effects separately and disaggregate among different population groups and contexts.
   - Among whom are you looking for impact? How will the impact of the programme vary across subgroups? How will mixed results be judged?

Each of these six dimensions has specific implications for what, when and how frequently change is measured. Moreover, these dimensions and measurement implications are related. Assessing impact across multiple subjects and levels of change, among whom benefits may vary by subgroup, will require longer amounts of time to observe changes and disaggregation of results. Other evaluation scholars examine in greater depth the implications of different programme attributes for programme design and measurement.[21] Table 3 presents an overview of the dimension with guiding questions to help facilitate discussions about impact among different stakeholders.

Table 3: Summary of dimensions of impact

Dimension	Range of options and examples		Which aspects of measurement are affected?
Application	**Projection:** forecasting change (environment impact assessment) **Prospective**: explicit statement of intended change(s) at outset guides strategy, management, monitoring and evaluation **Retrospective**: evaluation designed and conducted at the end of an intervention		• Type of design • Questions asked
Scope	Specific, pre-defined, knowable Undefined, unexpected, unknowable		• Mode of inference: Generally use deductive methods Generally use inductive methods
Subject and level of change	**Subject or unit** • Individual • Household • Community group (women's cooperative, natural resource management committee) • Network (i.e., Tax Justice Network) • Institution (civil society organisation, government agency, business) • Population (i.e., HIV incidence, national economic growth) • Sector (civil society, public sector, private sector) • Policy • Environment	**Level** • Local • State/province • National • Regional (ECOWAS, Mekong Valley) • Continental (African Union, European Union) • Global (SDGs, G20, BRICS, High Level Fora on Aid Effectiveness)	• Unit of measurement • Extent of confounding factors • Sampling
Degree of separation (number of steps in causal pathway from activity to impact)	**Direct and fairly certain,** e.g. health screening and treatment will reduce disease **Direct but uncertain,** e.g. advocacy with legislators will lead to policy change **Moderate,** e.g. improved access to markets will increase sales, which will increase income **Distant and uncertain,** e.g. vulnerable groups will participate in community groups, which will increase their influence in decision-making, which will improve pro-poor policy-making, which will improve livelihoods		• Number of measurements along the change pathway • Extent of confounding factors, strength of causal claims and need to account for alternative explanations
Immediacy, rate and durability of change	**Time frames** • Immediate- to short-term change, e.g. medication treating infection • Seasonal, e.g. agricultural yields • Short- to medium-term, e.g. increased income • Medium- to long-term, e.g. sustained business • Long-term, e.g. gender norms	**Permanence** • Irreversible, e.g. education • Reversible/changeable, e.g. income, job status, agricultural yields, bacterial infection • More durable but still reversible, e.g. institutional changes and norms, rights, improved natural resource management	• Timing of measurement • Frequency of measurement • Effect of measurement on the measured
Homogeneity of benefits (How consistent are benefits across groups? Do benefits for one group affect benefits of another?)	**Predominantly uniform benefits,** e.g. vaccination, education and training **Variable benefits,** e.g. outcomes that are relationship-dependent where certain groups may have differential access or be treated differently (market linkages, community decision-making) **Rival benefits,** e.g. access to markets (increased supply of the same products could reduce prices for all farmers)		• Extent of disaggregation • External validity/ generalisability

5. Conclusion

This paper highlights the existence of different definitions and interpretations of impact, within a context where attention to impact is increasingly prominent and instrumental in shaping the funding, design, management and evaluation of development programmes. First and foremost, we call upon development practitioners and evaluators to be explicit in how they use the term. Formal definitions are abundant but it is clear that in practice people have different understandings; it cannot be assumed that others will know what is meant when the term impact is used. Some might argue for an outright ban on the word impact because it carries with it so much baggage and misunderstanding. While this may not be possible, it should be feasible to enrich the use of the term with more nuance about what we mean – using the alternative terminology discussed in this paper.

Secondly, the paper has pointed to two issues in particular that require more discussion with regards to impact: climate change and systems change. Climate change is high on the agenda of most development actors and yet environmental effects rarely form part of our definition of impact. The nature of development interventions has also shifted over the past two decades, away from the delivery of goods and services and more towards supporting systemic change, focusing on issues such as governance, political economy and policy dialogue (Gillies and Alvarado 2012). The goals of these programmes are not solely about improving people's lives but about ensuring that their lives and the contexts in which they are living can continue to be improved, which implies different kinds of impact.

This paper presents three approaches that can serve as the basis for discussions among development stakeholders to clarify how they are conceiving of impact: the impact possibility continuum, five ways the term is used in practice and six dimensions along which impacts can vary. No one approach or definition will be universally appropriate for all programmes and people, which is implicitly acknowledged in the OECD-DAC definition by the breadth of its scope. However, in order to assess impact, it must be more operationally defined and bounded to be feasible to measure in a systematic way. Explicitly discussing who means what by 'impact' is a critical first step in enabling impact assessment and judgement.

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