

Date of Session: February 18, 2019

Title of Session: From the Eye of the Storm – The journey of moving from heart-warming stories to understanding impact

Session Description: *Evolving from an anecdotal narrative to rigorous evaluation: End Poverty will share its journey of aligning the expectations of different stakeholders to become an impact-driven organization by putting the client at the center. We're not reporting from the aftermath (with the flashy results) but are sharing our experience from the eye of the storm.*

Speakers:

- Madalena Santos, End Poverty

Defining terms: Impact-driven, evaluation, human centered design.

Session Objectives:

The objective of this session is for attendees to share their experience working on ways to align stakeholders to become an impact-driven organization, while Madalena presents End Poverty's experience/perspective.

Lead Discussants' Remarks:

This session is titled "Eye of the Storm" because often organizations find themselves in a "foggy" moment where they are identifying impact issues and what the solutions should be.

When Madalena took her current position, she had several challenges. From the operations point of view, she wanted to know if what End Poverty was doing was *actually having an impact*, and what that impact was. This led her to visit her stakeholders for six months, who told her very compelling stories about their experiences. However, Madalena still felt that she was not seeing the entire picture. Everyone in the value chain had been used to sharing positive and heart-warming stories, but not really discussing the challenges. This is where the organization's journey of going deeper into the issues began.

They discovered the importance of focusing not only on the system, but on the culture of the organization. Before going into costly and time-consuming evaluation, they decided to take a more practical approach and analyze the processes within the organization and its projects.

An example of analyzing the process before the impact: Focusing on a project where extremely vulnerable persons were going to classes and receiving rice as a way to compensate their time. The team realized attendees were not generating income. Realizing they had mistaken nutritious food to be more valuable than income, they had to go back and understand the process and what was going on. They discovered that the food was not something attendees were accustomed to, so they were not using it. This led them to implement a client-driven approach (from human centered design thinking HCD).

There was a constant struggle between finding funds, getting more donors and on the other hand focusing more in rethinking the processes and how that could improve the impact. They had to find a way to change the culture towards a more impact-driven one while at the same time being careful not to lose the support they had gained from donors and partners throughout their years of work.

To understand the impact of a project they had to decide the approach, she describes it as choosing between relevance (depth, rigorousness) and ease. They chose the “easy” option, doing faster and maybe less deep or rigorous studies because they needed quick results.

They designed a strategy to assess their projects and relied on partners to buy into their new ideas, being careful to adapt tools to the different realities of participants, they used design thinking for this. Also, they wanted to give their partners the opportunity to use these tools to improve their own capabilities, so that the work wouldn't only be a burden, but something they could benefit and learn from.

Q&A Overview:

- **How to track the progress and “properness” of data collection?** End Poverty relies on partners, but it struggles with data collection and reliability, something it is working to improve. Additionally, “impact” is very hard to see considering, for example, how small the loans are. End Poverty must continuously improve communication with partners, done through improved follow-up with entrepreneurs. But it is hard to show “high impact,” which is often all partners are looking for.
- **How to present information to donors/board members and how to handle the relationship?** Gradually. End Poverty had to manage communication and its message very well. It was lucky to have a receptive board, but it's still in the process of shifting the strategy. The hardest aspect of this is convincing those that thought everything was “fine” that there is still room for improvement.
- **What's been the most challenging part of implementing this kind of drastic change in only two-years** (how long Madalena has been there)? From the start she knew the challenge she was trying to confront, which made it an interesting personal challenge for her. The art of balancing pushing and patience.
- **Surveys: How are they done?** They are created as an integral part of the partnership structure such that they can just implement and/or modify themselves. They also have an open channel of communication and it is very constant.

Key Takeaways:

1. It's difficult to change a culture within an organization. From the very top to the bottom there has to be buy-in.
2. Sometimes the biggest and most rigorous evaluation is not the best option - there are trade-offs in every decision.

3. Adapt impact assessment mechanism to local realities and make it a tool for partners to learn from and use.