

Turning data into understanding: from numbers to meaning.

The “how to” presentation.



doimpact.eu

Meaning-making and sensemaking

- (1)** Meaning-making is the process by which individuals construct or derive significance from their experiences, interactions, and the world around them. It is tied to how individuals interpret the world based on their deep-seated beliefs, goals, and values. These act as a personal operating system, a software of sorts. When specific events conflict with these sociocultural elements, individuals engage in meaning-making to reconcile the discrepancy, helping them process the situation and manage potential distress.

Meaning-making and sensemaking

- (2)** Sensemaking is a specific, active, and social process of "turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action". It is the human process of navigating new, uncertain, or ambiguous situations by organizing information and knowledge, reflecting on past experiences, and creating a plan to address unfamiliar challenges.

Kitchen, 2016




What's it about?

It is not about finding an "accurate" answer, but a "plausible" one that allows an individual to act. It is often described as "acting your way into a new way of thinking".

It involves continuous cycles of **interpretation** (understanding the situation) and **enactment** (taking action to test that understanding).

"Subjective Impact Gap"



Members of social enterprises often experience dissonance between their expectation that their work will make a difference and their lived experience of uncertainty or lack of immediate and visible results. This is known as a "subjective impact gap".

Internalizing

When members face ambiguity (such as not seeing direct results or having distant beneficiaries), they engage in internalizing. They interpret this lack of feedback as a sign that "impact takes time" or "impact is invisible," and they enact this by creating psychological closeness (e.g., humanizing beneficiaries or using tangible artifacts in the workplace) to make the impact more salient to themselves.

Compensating

When members face discrepancy (receiving negative feedback or evidence that outcomes are lower than expected), they engage in compensating. They reinterpret the scope of their work to realize that impact can be "broader than the mission." They enact this by broadening their efforts to include activities outside the organization's formal mission, such as supporting colleagues or engaging in broader social entrepreneurship ecosystems, to generate visible impact and restore their sense of purpose.

Identity and Feedback

Drencheva et al. (2021) explore how social entrepreneurs navigate "interpersonal feedback seeking" (IFS). They demonstrate that sensemaking is identity-driven: these entrepreneurs interpret challenges as threats to their "identity" or "image" and adjust their strategies accordingly.

Provisional Identities and Identity Effects

Other research suggests that social entrepreneurs often hold "provisional identities" while transitioning into their roles, using feedback-seeking experiments to strengthen their **self-view** and confirm their **competence**. Fernando (2020) discusses the "identity effects" of organizational practices. This knowledge is useful in examining **how external institutional pressures affect the internal meaning-making** of social enterprise **staff members**.

Ecosystem-level Sensemaking

Since decades ago (Nicholls, 2010) demonstrated how the **social entrepreneurship field** seeks "**legitimacy**." This is essentially a collective or macro-level form of sensemaking where the entire sector attempts to create a "plausible image" to justify its existence to stakeholders, even in a "pre-paradigmatic" (uncertain and undefined) field.

Meaning-making and -sharing

Teasdale et al. (2022) argue that social entrepreneurship is not an objective category but a social construction. Its "shared meaning" is constantly being renegotiated by various actors who push their own definitions to suit specific political or economic goals.

This research demonstrates that **we cannot understand social entrepreneurship without also understanding the temporal and ideological context in which it is being defined.** What it means to be a "social enterprise" today is fundamentally different from what it meant 20 years ago, because the concept has been successfully "re-packaged" to remain relevant in a changing world.

Conclusions: Why?

- Impact is experienced subjectively by stakeholders.
- IMM should include the beneficiaries' own definitions of success. If a social enterprise ignores the "subjective impact gap," they risk losing internal motivation and external legitimacy.
- Engaging stakeholders (beneficiaries, staff, partners) in the IMM processes itself turns evaluation into a form of sensemaking. It allows the organization to learn why an intervention worked (or failed) and adapt accordingly.

Conclusions: How?

- Ask: "Will this data actually help me make a decision?" If not, don't collect it.
- Start simple with small-scale surveys or feedback loops. As the enterprise grows, you can move toward more advanced frameworks like SROI (Social Return on Investment), which assigns financial value to social outcomes.
- Acknowledge that social and economic goals can create "productive tensions." Measurement should not be used to "solve" these tensions (which may be impossible) but to manage them through dialectic inquiry, that is constantly questioning if the organization is staying true to its social mission.

Assoc. Prof.
Dr. Ieva Žebrytė
ieva.zebryte@evaf.vu.lt

 **doimpact.eu**