

# The influence of Context on Social Impact Assessment tools

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## ABSTRACT

The need for Social Impact Assessment has grown over the last years, which is accompanied by the need for suitable tools that support this assessment process. This research focuses on how a design brief for such a tool can be set up. Qualitative research at Zet (the Netherlands) and Nuqat (Kuwait) was conducted to gain an understanding of the meaning, creation and measurement of Social Impact in the respective context. As a result of this research, several underlying dimensions of Social Impact Assessment tools were found. This paper describes which directive questions can guide the development of a Social Impact Assessment tool that suits the local context.

## Author Keywords

Social Impact, Impact Assessment, Local Context Analysis, Transformative Practices

## PREFACE

With an interest in Social Impact, I came to Kuwait to do research within Nuqat, a non-profit organisation which focuses on developing and spreading creative problem-solving skills in the Arab world. [36] As part of this mission they host Exploration Sessions throughout the Middle East: Nuqat on Tour. By discussing topics like Design, Education, Urbanism and Funding they try to identify and understand topics that could contribute to a Creative Economy, which is described as the intersection between “culture, business and technology”. [27] During one of these discussions about ‘Funding Creative and Cultural Industries’ (Kuwait, November 2016) the idea was raised to develop a Social Impact Index suited to the business and social environment in Kuwait. The goal of this Index is to help the transition of a monetary driven ecosystem to one that is concerned with addressing societal needs.

Status quo on my arrival: it was researched which indicators of Social Impact would be used for the

Index, next step would be integrating measurement tools that support the integration of these indicators. However, after looking into the developed indicators, I concluded that - to my definitions - these indicators rather reflected Corporate Social Responsibility than Social Impact.

This resulted in a switch of research direction and approach. I wanted to gain an understanding of why the Index was developed as it was: what dimensions or entities played a role in this? How do culture and society influence the understanding of Social Impact, the way to create it and the way to measure it? This also meant I had to take my own perspective and accompanying assumptions into account, which makes this research very personal. To speak with Annemarie van Geel’s words, who conducted her PhD research in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait:

*“Had another Dutch non-Muslim unmarried unaccompanied female researcher carried out this project, the results could have been different. Had a Saudi, Muslim, married female researcher carried out this project, again the results might have been different. Or they might not.”* [8]

## INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT

When discussing Social Impact, some people might shrug their shoulders and don’t know what you are talking about. Others might have a feeling for what it means and try to explain it by giving examples. Some even describe it by the feeling itself: *“Everyone thinks we need it [e.g. Social Impact]. Like, we intrinsically believe that we do need it. But what does it look like?”* [54]

Literature doesn’t really clarify the situation much. Dr Bronwen Dalton describes Social Impact as *“the sum effect of any intervention or program that we make to address social disadvantage or perhaps an environmental issue”*. [57] Definitions like these leave a lot of room for interpretation. But we might be facing a chicken-or-the-egg situation here: Can

Social Impact be interpreted in multiple ways, because there is no rigid definition? Or is there no rigid definition, because Social Impact can be interpreted in multiple ways?

I would like to take a standpoint in this paper by stating that Social Impact can be interpreted in multiple ways, since context puts Social Impact in perspective. Impact implies how much of a difference is made, so the bigger the local urgency for intervention, the more impact could be reached. This is why measuring Social Impact between multiple contexts is from my standpoint a tricky thing to do: you can't compare different numbers if you don't know their values.

For various values we are aware of different metrics in different contexts, and we developed manners to convert one into another, like distance (kilometre, mile, etc) or money (Euro, Dollar, etc). But the values of Social Impact are considered to be rather 'soft', which makes them difficult to quantify and measure. [23] Mulgan refers to social value as a *"non-financial impacts of programmes, organisations and interventions, including the wellbeing of individuals and communities, social capital and the environment."* [13]

So why is there an increasing need for measuring Social Impact? The Open Course about Social Impact Measurement of the University of Technology Sydney summarizes it in four categories: to track progress; to inform strategies; to most effectively contribute to society; to gain confidence & support of funders. [57]

Also, they set several key challenges. The first one is about resourcing measuring impact: many organisations are only funded for the service they deliver, in which impact measurement is not always embedded. The second challenge is a standardized methodology and validated tools, to make the results accurate and defensible. UTS proposes the use of a Theory of Change and a Logic Model. Other tools that are currently in use to assess Social Impact are for example a Cost Benefit Analysis, Social Accounting, Social Return on Investment or a Basic Efficiency Resource Analysis. [13]

In this research, the development of two different Social Impact Assessment tools in different contexts is analysed. A short introduction of the tools is provided below, a more detailed description is incorporated in the Result section of this paper, to illustrate and support the findings of this research.



Figure 1 The Social Impact tools of Zet. Visuals retrieved from [www.wijzijnzet.nl](http://www.wijzijnzet.nl) [38]

#### Zet (Netherlands)- Playing with Impact & Social Impact Monitor

Zet developed a tool that is very much in line with the Logic Model that is used by the UTS. It namely works with the terms Desired Impact, Input, Approach, Output, Outcome and Impact. First, a physical game is played with the stakeholders, to get a feeling for the meaning of these terms. Then, a strategy for the project is formed, in which these terms are used to structure the process. The stakeholders develop this strategy with guidance of Zet. Zet makes use of a Monitor (which looks a bit like a spiderweb), to determine the current and desired values that the project is aiming for. At the end of the project, the values are measured again, to see the realized set of values. Visualizing all this information helps to show the realized impact of the project.



Figure 2 The mock-up of the Social Impact Index of Nuqat. Visuals retrieved from Nuqat [31]

### Nuqat (Kuwait) – Social Impact Index

Nuqat is still in the development phase of their Social Impact Index. It aims to finish the first pilot of the Index soon, so that pilot research can be done with multiple stakeholders to test out the Index. The current intended tool would work as follows: The Index is an online platform, where companies could ‘check’ their Social Impact. They answer several questions in four domains: Employees, Environment, Suppliers and Community. By filling in their data, they receive a score at the end, once their data is checked by an independent controller. This score can be used to see where improvement is still possible, and Nuqat is also setting up a consultancy service that would be able to help these companies in doing so. Next to that, the score is accompanied by a ‘label’, which can be used by the company to show their impact to the outside world (e.g. This label shows that this company creates ‘Green Social Impact’, which matches a score of 75-100 on the Nuqat Social Impact Index).

### RESEARCH APPROACH

This research towards Social Impact Assessment in a new context, was guided by making use of the following metaphor:

When abstracting the concept of ‘language’, it can be stated that the Dutch people make use of the Latin alphabet. They read from the left to the right and have certain rules for pronunciation of these letters, which again can be influenced if you combine certain letters. So, when you aim to develop measurement metrics for how well someone can read

the Dutch language, you have to take all these underlying principles into account.

The same goes for the Arabic language. In Kuwait, they make use of the Arabic letter system, which is accompanied by their own ways of pronunciation and reading direction – which is in this case from right to left! Although both these situations cover the concept of language, it would make no sense to use the Dutch metrics on the Kuwaiti language and vice versa.

I approached ‘Social Impact’ as a similar concept as ‘language’, as described in this particular metaphor. I grew up in the Netherlands, am familiar with our local context and already researched several processes concerning Social Impact (e.g. projects of Cindy van den Bremen, Sietske Klooster, Philémonne Jaasma) for the Transformative Practices Framework of Caroline Hummels et al, together with Renee Noortman. [24] Also, I researched and visualized several processes at Zet, a Dutch organisation concerned with social inclusion and participation. [38] In this process, I got familiar with Social Impact tools that Zet has developed. [48] Looking at these tools, I could see they fit our context and processes.

However, when I entered Kuwait, the first thing I looked at was the Social Impact Index that Nuqat is developing. [31] I realized there was no way for me to be able to reflect whether this would be suitable, if I didn’t understand the local context and processes in Kuwait. Therefore it was key for me to focus on this first. By reading, observing and discussing, I got a grip on these underlying principles, which put the development of the Index in perspective and enabled me to research the tool in more depth.

To give a few examples: Kuwait is extremely wealthy, because of the oil industry. However, mainly Kuwaiti benefit from this wealth: they get supported in i.a. their health, education, housing and work. It is stated by law that a Kuwaiti is entitled to a job at the government, which means that if they work there, they can never be fired. To put this situation in perspective: only 20% of the population is Kuwaiti from origin, the rest are expats. If a Kuwaiti woman marries a non-Kuwaiti man, she loses her nationality and therefore her privileges.

Many Kuwaiti children grow up without a sense of fulfilment. [49] However, since their education is supported, many of them study abroad and come back to Kuwait with new perspectives. Also, the recent rise of Social Media enlarged the perspective of many locals. [53]

Kuwait has a Collectivistic culture. [9] Collectivistic business practices are known for their personal relationships, a 'wasta' is therefore essential in Kuwait. A 'wasta' is a connector or mediator, someone who is trusted by both parties.

These are only a few out of many observations of the Kuwaiti society. In case you are interested to read more about this, I advise you to read the thesis of Annemarie van Geel, who wrote several chapters about gender segregation, Islam and modernity in Kuwait. [8]

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Intuitive Inquiry

Intuitive Inquiry is a research method, which is often used to study transformative experiences. It is a method that invites to transform both the understanding of the topic and the personal life, which makes it very applicable for this research. [2]

Intuitive Inquiry traditionally works with 5 cycles:

*In cycle 1*, the research topic is defined. Usually, this is something that the researcher is engaged with or triggered by on a regular basis.

*In cycle 2*, the researcher defines his or her current perspective on the topic, the so called 'preliminary lenses'.

*In cycle 3*, the researcher collects data on the topic, which can be done in various ways.

*In cycle 4*, the data is reviewed and reflected upon by redefining the preliminary lenses.

*In cycle 5*, the findings are integrated and it is determined what parts of the research are valuable.

In this research, Intuitive Inquiry is used as a backbone to structure the research process. It helped to clarify the research topic, to set aside assumptions and to be open as a researcher for new perspectives without constantly relating them to my own.

### Delphi Method

The Delphi Method facilitates a panel discussion amongst different experts on a certain topic. It seeks for a mutual agreement by conducting multiple rounds of feedback for further discussion. Important part of this method is the anonymity of the panel members, which therefore not demands the physical presence of every member at the same time, but also cancels out the social dynamics that a normal discussion would have. This means for example that panellist don't have to worry about repercussions for the opinions they share. [32]

The basic structure for a Delphi research consists out of 3 steps. Step 2 and 3 can be repeated until consensus is reached:

*In step 1*, the facilitator asks questions to a panel of experts. This happens anonymously!

*In step 2*, the panellists share their opinion on the topic(s).

*In step 3*, the facilitator summarizes all responses and sends a revised version back to the panel.

This method was used amongst two different panels, one with employees of Nuqat (Kuwait) and one with employees of Zet (Netherlands). The questionnaire was used to gain an understanding of the definition, creation and measurement of Social Impact in the respective places, in a more objective manner than purely interpretation of experience. The output of this specific part of the research can be found in the Appendix.

## RESULTS: SUGGESTED DIMENSIONS

I researched the Social Impact tools from Nuqat and Zet, their context and the interaction between them: How does context influence the development of a tool? And how could the tool potentially influence the context? As a result of this research, several underlying dimensions that are important to take into account when designing a Social Impact tool were distinguished. Based on this, I developed a set of questions one could ask when developing Social Impact Assessment tools that suit the local context. Answers to these questions can form the basis for a Design Brief to guide the design decisions.

Below are all questions stated, illustrated by my qualitative research findings. NB: These are not the questions I asked during my research, but the questions I would ask next time!

### Mindset

#### *What does Social Impact mean locally?*

At first sight, the definitions of Social Impact as researched within Zet and Nuqat (by making use of the Delphi Method) seem to align quite well:

*"Social Impact is the result of an action triggered by an individual or an entity (whether private, governmental or NGO) and that has transformed multiple individuals in a recognizable manner."* – Nuqat [25]

*"Social impact is societal change due to your\* actions (\*your can refer to a person, an organization, programme or project)." – Zet [26]*

Both panels also agreed that Social Impact can be both positive or negative and can be intentional and unintentional.

However, when researching the definition and execution in more detail, interesting nuances come to light that have a major impact on the understanding of Social Impact. Not knowing these nuances can lead to a giant ripple effect in creating a non-fitting Social Impact Assessment tool.

For Nuqat, Social Impact tells something about your social footprint. What do you do to society? How well do you treat the ones you are surrounded with? What is your position in the supply chain? This reflects the Collectivistic mindset of Arabic countries. [9]

As explained in the Delphi Research, Social Impact in Kuwait can be understood in two forms: it can be intentional or an externality of an organisation:

**Intentional** means that the organisations are built on the idea of positive social/environmental impact. Positive impact is embedded naturally in the workings of the company.

An **Externality** implies that the organisation is not based on a mandate that is to promote social wellbeing. Social Impact is not addressed within the organisations main operations rather it's part of a CSR program or another initiative. [25]

For Zet, Social Impact is more closely related to inclusion and participation. Moreover, it focusses on how you can help, support or facilitate others in achieving goals or solving/avoiding social problems. By sharing knowledge, creating values, experimenting and adapting solutions to different contexts, Zet enlarges the impact changemakers could achieve on their own. [26]

This practice reflects the Netherlands' extreme Individualistic score on Hofstede's dimension. An Individualistic society is characterized by universalism: the same standards are supposed to apply to everyone and everyone should be able to participate as much as possible in normal life. [9]

**By developing a Social Impact assessment tool, do you respond to a question? (pull) Or do you start a movement? (push)**

In the Netherlands, Social Impact Assessment is currently a hot topic. More and more organisations are willing to measure their impact, whether it is to steer their process or to account investments. Projects evolved around Social Impact work frequently with grants or funding from Funds or other (governmental) organisations. Accountability

for these investments has been common practice for a long time, but the definition of accountability has changed over time. Where it used to be sufficient to communicate how many hours were spent on a project, or how many people were reached in numbers, it is now more relevant to know how these hours were spent and what the impact of this investment has been. Impact assessment tools therefore respond to a question coming from different levels of the society.

In Kuwait, the status quo is very different. The extreme wealth of Kuwait may be a reason for the reduced urge for efficient investment. The Kuwaiti government facilitates the Kuwaiti in their basic needs: education, housing, energy and job security are all supported by the government. The economy is rather focused on the division of (Non-) Governmental Organisations and (Non-) Profit Organisations. Which practices may or may not be conducted by certain organisations is in that sense more strict than in the Netherlands. For example, LOYAC (NPO) is working on educational programs in Kuwait, though they are restricted from doing this at public schools. [51] Except for some pioneering organisations, Social Impact is no part of the agenda of most organisations. The development of a Social Impact Index therefore leads to a lot of resistance: "Why would we need this?" is the most common response. [53]

Whether the context you are developing a tool for has a pull- or push environment towards Social Impact, has a massive influence on the other dimensions as described below. This is mainly reflected in the availability of resources and way of attracting stakeholders to use your tool.

## Resources

### **How much manpower do you have available to develop the tool?**

The usage and development of the Social Impact tools of Zet is incorporated in their business. Either clients pay for the service Zet is providing by measuring their impact, or this service is subsidized or co-financed. Further development of the existing or new tools can therefore be applied in context. At Nuqat, all development of the Index happens on a voluntary basis. This affects the availability of i.a. people and time dedicated to the development of the Index.

### **What valuable data is available?**

Data is a sensitive topic that entails both possibilities and ethical dilemmas. The local mindset and behaviour around data therefore affects both sides of the spectrum. In Kuwait, not many data is gathered.

[52] On the one hand, this means that a data driven tool would increase the threshold to use the tool. On the other hand, it also increases the possibilities the tool could offer. During several Exploration Sessions people expressed their desire for a benchmarking system, so that they could see how they are doing compared to other organisations. [30] A data driven tool could therefore meet their needs and hit two birds with one stone.

In the Netherlands, the challenge for data is a bit more nuanced. The debate between qualitative and quantitative data has been going on for a while now. Arguments for i.a. objectivity, sensitivity and clarity seek for a consensus to how data can be used to represent situations best. Local opinions on which data is valued help to optimize the design decisions of the respective tools.

***Do you have the required knowledge and skills available? What other monetary and non-monetary means do you have?***

Creating a 'design brief' is one of the first steps to be taken: Why do we make the tool? How should it work? What should the aesthetics of the tool be in order to support the desired interaction? For every step (why, how, what), relevant expertise is needed. It is advised to seek for partners when you don't have the required expertise available in-house.

In some cases it requires monetary means to bring in this external expertise. In other cases a different kind of collaboration can be set up, like Nuqat who collaborates with Strategy& on a pro-bono basis on the 'why and how' of the tool. At the aesthetical side of the spectrum, Nuqat can make use of the multiple graphic designers they employ. Zet on the other hand, had to hire an external graphic design company to do so.

#### **Goal**

***For what purpose is the tool used? Is the tool focused on internal and/or external usage?***

Zet currently makes use of two tools that are evolved around Social Impact. The first one has a playful setting in which the stakeholders get familiar with the terms input, approach, output, outcome and impact. This tool is used to align the process and form a strategy to create the desired impact. The second tool is used to monitor the impact. By making use of a set of values, the current and desired situation are firstly analysed. At the end of the project, the final setting is again measured to visualize the realized change in values.

The Index that Nuqat is currently developing will be used to evaluate the organisation and to point out aspects of improvement. Since the tool consists of a

data based platform, a benchmark is created that also enables organisations to see how they are doing compared to their competitors. On top of that, the results of the tool will be translated into a label, which can be used for marketing purposes.

The (internal or external) focus of the tool affects i.a. the ways in which information must be formulated, how evidence must be supplied, how to deal with sensitive information, etc.

***At what moment of the process do you use the tool? How frequently?***

The playful Impact tool that Zet has developed, is mostly used at the beginning of a project. Though not applied yet, it could also function as a monitoring tool during the process. The Social Impact Monitor is used at the beginning of a project to set a benchmark for that specific project, and at the end of the project to determine the impact.

At Nuqat the intended use differs from Zet, in the sense that it focusses on companies rather than initiatives. Their tool is therefore more focussed on setting conditions. This brings the linguistic nuance of the word 'measure' to light: do you measure or take measures? Nuqat's response: "*What is the point of measuring if it is not to take measures?*"

#### **Stakeholders**

***Who are your stakeholders? What information do you need from them?***

At Zet, Social Impact focusses on what societal change is realized due to interventions. [26] How these interventions affected involved stakeholders is key. Therefore these stakeholders are incorporated in the Social Impact Assessment by making use of questionnaires and interviews about related values. On the strategic part, it is the changewanters that make use of the tool, guided by employees of Zet.

The Index of Nuqat is rather focused on how a company is organized, and therefore the tool could intentionally be filled in by one person. In most cases this will be the director of the company, as this person has most information to its disposal. However, it could be argued that (some of the) data is therefore rather subjective.

***What means could you apply to gain (the desired) information?***

Zet makes use of a physical game to discuss Social Impact. By moving around physical elements, stakeholders can express their thoughts, share their opinion and start a discussion. This interaction illustrates something about the Dutch culture: it is okay to differ in opinion and debate about this.

This is also shown in the interactive conversation tool of Philémonne Jaasma, [X]Changing Perspectives, in which physical tokens are used to mediate multi-stakeholder discussions about societal challenges. [10] If these tools would work as well in other cultures is yet unknown, but it is likely to assume that this is not the case in every situation.

The interaction of these tools can be related to the cultural dimensions of Hofstede. [9] The Netherlands is known for its Low Power Distance and is prevalently Uncertainty Accepting, which is reflected in the tools of i.a. Zet and Jaasma. This is in contrast with Arabic countries, which are characterized by a High Power Distance and are relatively Uncertainty Avoiding. Fun fact: the Netherlands and Arabic countries are contrary on every dimension as described in Hofstede's theory. These cultural dimensions are important to be aware of when entering a new context, so that the approach and interaction fit the local culture.

This can also be traced back in the development of the Index of Nuqat. This will be an online tool in which data can be entered. However, it is already presumed that people might not be completely transparent about their data or sugarcoat reality. When aware of this phenomenon, this can be taken into account in the design of the tool. As an example, Nuqat now plans to integrate a controller as a safeguard to verify the data.

***What roles are there whilst using the tool? Who plays what role?***

The users of the tool and/or their respective roles can change over time. At Zet, the tool is used by stakeholders and Zet at the same time, in which Zet has an assisting and guiding role. At Nuqat, the idea is to hand over the tool to the company, that delivers the data. Thereafter, an independent controller will check the data before the 'results' are published. Also, a consultancy service is being developed for customers that want help in increasing their Social Impact.

***How do you attract stakeholders to use the tool? How do you communicate the results to your stakeholders?***

Social Impact Assessment is part of Zet's business and thus there is quite some attention for it, since it is one of the core values Zet has to offer as an organisation. In several media is shown how the process works, what steps are taken and how results are communicated. [48]

At Nuqat, the focus is on the marketing potential of the tool. By using the tool, a certain 'label' can be earned that showcases that you create 'blue', 'orange' or 'green' Social Impact with your

company (each colour corresponds with the quantitative result of the Index). The company is allowed to use this label as some sort of quality mark, which is intended to make their products more attractive for consumers to buy. Nuqat tries to meet the needs of their users (e.g. competitive advantage, improved brand reputation, increased profits), whilst bringing in a fresh mindset (e.g. healthier working environment for its staff, impactful supply chain, innovative products/services, enabling environment). [31]

**CONCLUSION**

Social Impact Assessment is becoming more and more important in today's society. Relevant tools are needed to respond to this increasing need. However, since the definition and creation of Social Impact are context related, this research argues for assessment tools that reflect these underlying principles as well. Several dimensions and subdimensions of Social Impact Assessment tools are distinguished from qualitative research in the Netherlands and Kuwait. These dimensions (e.g. mindset, resources, goal, stakeholders) can guide the design process of developing a suiting Social Impact Assessment tool in a (new) context. Some of these questions are fairly easy to answer, but most demand a (high) level of understanding of the local context. This research helps developers of Social Impact Assessment tools, to point out focus areas of research that are needed to understand the local context for this purpose.

**DISCUSSION**

This research has been very personal and qualitative, which makes the suggested dimensions also very unique. Further research from different perspectives in multiple contexts would therefore benefit the findings and is needed to refine the stated dimensions.

Most part of this research has been conducted in Kuwait, which was a completely new context for me. This research is based on the findings I have been able to gain within the given timespan. However, as described by Ibtihal Al Khatib, journalist and teacher at the Kuwait University: "*You have to be from the community to understand Kuwait, how it functions.*" [49] Even though regularly reflected with Kuwaiti, a more in depth cross-research would be interesting to further develop these findings (e.g. Researcher from context X and researcher from context Y researching both context X and Y).

Next to that, the contexts in which this research was conducted, are subjected to change. To only provide two examples: the Netherlands introduced a new participation law in 2015 and Kuwait was part of the

Arabic Spring in 2011. [41][18] Both these interventions are still embedding in the respective societies. From a Transformative Practices point of view it is very interesting to keep assessing the findings of this research to these transforming societies.

NB: As a result of this research Nuqat has responded to change the approach of their Social Impact Index. This means that all information stated in this research about the development of the Index is based on the status at November 2018, which may not match the final tool that may be launched in the future.

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NB: I am aware that the following way of organizing references is not common. However, I consider it relevant to show the width of my research by showing all resources, even though not all directly referred to in this paper. I hope this inspires other researchers in their approach towards complex social systems, which is why I included a list that reflects my research process rather than solely my research paper.

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