



HSRC
Human Sciences
Research Council

STRUCTURING AN IMPACT STORY

Relevance • Visibility • Impact

Background

What is an impact story? Impact stories are a useful way to systematically document anecdotal evidence that expected research activities occurred, and the consequences of these activities. The goal is to tell a compelling story about how your research, program, policy or intervention directly or indirectly led to change in or benefit to the economy, society, or culture. Whilst the narrative is key in this process, impact stories can be strengthened with data in the form of metrics and indicators. Impact stories should be used in conjunction with other Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) tools, including Impact Statements, Theory of Change models, Logic Models and other qualitative and quantitative assessment and evaluation methodologies.

The HSRC is mandated to conduct research that ultimately improves the lives of South Africans by reducing poverty and inequality. We inform policies and programmes, build capacity and collaborate, and stimulate debate by disseminating of research results and expert opinions. Demonstrating the impact of our work starts with carefully considering our target audience and choosing the most suitable product or platform to reach them.

Your audience Your target audience may include parliamentarians, policymakers, government departments, donors and funders, diplomats, other research organisations, academic institutions, secondary schools, the media, or community representatives. Many of them aren't science experts, or at least not in your field of science. Some may enjoy long-form articles. Others prefer vodcasts, podcasts or community engagement. Whichever medium you choose, consider covering the following elements in your story:

The challenge Describing the SA or global challenge(s) that an HSRC project is addressing is an important starting point for people to understand why they should care to engage with a researcher in the first place. Such a description often forms part of the introduction of articles, presentations, videos and other communications products. Explain in layman's terms which SA issue(s) the HSRC work speaks to. This description might include some recent statistics or news events that emphasise the seriousness of the challenge. Practise conceptualising and communicating the purpose of your work by talking to your mentors, finding good sources of statistics that speak to these challenges, and asking communications practitioners to help with words and phrases.

The HSRC response In this section, you will describe a research study, project, programme or engagement that the HSRC has initiated or that it has been commissioned to do. Provide details of the research, including information about what was done, when, where and by whom.

Unless the point of your story is to share a novel participatory research approach, try not to get lost in methodology when you talk to a popular audience about how the work was done. Make sure you describe fully any research insights or findings relating to impacts claimed in the next section.

Outputs, Outcomes and Impact This part of your story starts to map out how outputs resulting from research activities lead to defined outcomes. Taken together, this describes the impact your project may have achieved. Researchers have distinguished the following broad categories, viewed by some as part of impact and by others as leading to impact:

- **Outputs:** These describe the direct immediate results associated with the project or the products of your research. These include papers in academic journals and research reports.
- **Outcomes:** These are more medium-term results associated with your project and describe the awareness and use of your research by others. The research findings, our analysis thereof and our public engagements may have led to new policies and interventions that have improved the lives and wellbeing of South Africans, or they may have the potential to do so once implemented. Other outcomes could include media coverage of our work, citations of our research findings in evidence synthesis reports or policy briefs and toolkits and the uptake of research tools, instruments and methods.
- **Impact and impact pathways:** This refers to the consequences of people using our outputs or research findings. These may not necessarily lead to societal impact but may contribute to it. A key aspect of science communication is conveying research impact or potential impact by covering the 'So What?' question. HSRC research also has an impact when it influences and stimulates debates and improves the understanding of social science challenges. You should at least describe the actions and pathways through which your work will have impact in society. This section normally relates to the initial SA or global challenge mentioned in your communication