This participatory tool enables partners and project participants’ groups to identify what difference the interventions of the project/programme have made to them. The method is based on participants identifying stories of change - brief examples of changes in knowledge, skills and confidence and what they have done as a result of the intervention. These stories can be positive or negative - it is the respondent who makes this judgement. The identification of these examples encourages analysis of any outcomes and impact and also gives an indication of how strongly the change can be attributed to the programme/project interventions. The position of the examples on the grid can be analysed to see what patterns emerge (e.g. is it women giving this type of example? is one aspect of the project producing the greatest impact?). The grid can also help to identify stories that can be developed into more detailed case studies.

Who/When:

The tool can be used with individuals, groups and teams that potentially benefit (or are effected by) the project - this may be disadvantaged people or organisations, such as partners who are in a capacity building relationship with the implementers. It works best with participants that are literate but it can be used with illiterate respondents if resource people are present to write down the stories. As it is concerned with outcomes and impact the intervention needs to have been running for long enough that the inputs, activities and outputs can take effect. For example if the intervention is a training course then the impact grid could be used three or six months later but not immediately at the end of the course.

The Method

The grid consists of a vertical axis with a horizontal axis that divides the vertical one into a positive area (above the axis) for stories of +ve change and a negative area (below the axis) for stories that respondents rate as having had an adverse effect (-ve). The horizontal axis represents the respondent’s assessment of how strongly the change can be attributed to the project’s interventions e.g. if they believe that the action or change wouldn’t have happened without the project, they place their story on the strongly attributed end of the axis; if they believe that the action may have happened anyway but that some effect on the action was a consequence of the project, then they place their story on the weakly attributed end of the axis. When the exercise is completed the grid may have stories distributed across all parts of the positive and negative areas (though it is usual to have many more positive ones) along the grid.

To conduct an impact grid exercise, bring together the participants in a meeting/workshop. The minimum number is about six and the maximum is about 12 to 15. If there is more than this it is best to divide into groups of about twelve. The facilitator can be a member of the implementing team though it is easier if an outsider (who has no vested interest in the outcomes) runs the process. The facilitator outlines the recent history of the project to remind people of what has happened; this must be done sensitively to avoid biasing the respondents (i.e. reminding the participants of the project rather than listing all the activities and purported achievements).

Participants are then asked to think about whether and how the project has affected them and write down examples on post-it notes. There is no limit to how many stories each person can compile though in practice most identify about 2 to 4. The respondents then share their stories with a partner - this helps them to clarify their experience (and have the opportunity to re-word their example) and may also remind them about an outcome they had not originally identified.

The group then comes together again and each person reads out their story and sticks it onto the grid in the position they believe is appropriate. They explain to the group why they chose the location. Depending on the level of trust and power hierarchies in the room, there can then be an open discussion where participants can be challenged to reconsider the location and move the story if they agree with the challenge.

The analysis of the stories can be done together with the group (depending on the purpose and who is in the room). Otherwise, once the exercise is over the facilitator numbers each story and draws an A4 replica of the grid showing the position of the numbered stories (Don’t forget to do this, before removing the stories and taking down the grid!).
The stories are then analysed to identify the areas of change identified and any emerging patterns e.g. the proportion of positive to negative stories; the characteristics of the respondents giving negative stories; the characteristics of those reporting stories strongly attributed to the project (are they mainly women or men, richer or poorer, or is it certain types of interventions that evoke a strong attribution rating?) If the tool is being used as part of an evaluation then the grid and stories can be reproduced in the Appendix to the report while the conclusions from the analysis can be presented in the main body of the report.

The grid can be used over the life of the project with the same respondents to enable the implementing team to track how and when changes are emerging in the beneficiary groups. The tool can also provide an early identification of examples of change, and some of these may lend themselves to further examination and writing up as case studies.