

Internal Learning Systems: Participatory Evaluation using Diaries

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Internal Learning Systems (ILS) is a participatory research method that assesses impact while also addressing participant learning needs. Participants keep diaries to track changes in their lives and plan solutions for negative outcomes.

Common questions Internal Learning Systems

1. What does participatory evaluation require?

You should be committed to a participatory process, both in formulating diaries as well as making sense of the data you gather from them. This may take longer or involve more people in decision-making than you are used to.

2. What makes this method different from other kinds of evaluation?

ILS works well for ongoing impact evaluation; it is less appropriate for one-time summative evaluation of a project. It works well to track the kinds of changes that happen over years and not weeks. ILS empowers participants to take independent action to improve their lives, while the original pictorial model further extends this opportunity to those who may not have high levels of literacy. ILS provides relevant and meaningful impact information to participants, staff, board and funders.

3. Can any kind of organization use this method?

ILS works best when you have small groups of participants, such as a support group, a program cohort which goes through a process together or a self-help group (such as those used in microloan programs). The values and methods inherent in the system allow it to be flexible and it may look different in different organizations (i.e., those working with children versus those working with adults).

How to use this information in your organization

Step 1: Make your commitment to a participatory process

Step 2: Select a group of participants and staff to select indicators and advise on the diary format and contents.

Step 3: Train staff and participants on how to use the system. Train staff on how and when to do data collection.

The author was trained in the Internal Learning System by its developer, Dr. Helzi Noponen.