



WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT IMPACT

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Good morning, everyone.

You know, I was in the car a few years ago with my then 21-year-old daughter, Maria.

She had just graduated from university, and, inevitably, we started talking about career plans — specifically about careers which make a positive impact. I happened to have a copy of *Rotary* magazine in the car, and Maria started leafing through it.

Pausing over one article, she asked, “Dad, what is Rotary doing?”

“What do you mean, what are we doing?” I replied.

“Why in the world are Rotary clubs donating only textbooks to schools?”

Well, I took a deep breath and tried valiantly to lay out the arguments that our clubs often make when defending these sorts of projects.

“You know, over 50% of children in low- and middle-income countries can’t read and understand a basic text at age 10. Without these donations, they might have no access to this great learning opportunity.”

Now, my daughter is an intelligent, reasonable person who cares deeply about global development. She’s also had to sit through many hours of listening to me pontificate on international development issues.

And so her reply was swift and to the point: “Well, you seem to have forgotten that economists have tested the value of donating textbooks to schools. Without teacher training, providing textbooks has no impact on children’s school performance.”

Well, that certainly put me in my place.

But you know, she was right, and the skepticism she showed is real. It represents a fast-growing body of opinion that is also increasingly skeptical — if not critical — of what we do.

And this begs the question: Can we attract the next generation of community leaders to join us, work with us, and support our work? Because, as my conversation with Maria underscored, the need to measure our results is critical.

The challenge of making a real impact in a turbulent world is not only part of Rotary’s Action Plan. It is one of the defining issues of our era.

Now, this doesn't mean that there aren't good Rotary projects that are supporting lasting, positive change in our communities. But I'm increasingly convinced that we have to do better. The question is, how?

Well, the process begins by asking some tough questions. At the Secretariat, have we funded projects we shouldn't have? Are we collecting enough data to assess impact?

Those questions can be addressed in the implementation of our Action Plan. This plan represents the future of Rotary. It serves as our strategic road map to bring more people together, to do more, and to make lasting change.

It's an exciting vision, and we are launching 10 initiatives to bring it to life, including an initiative to measure our impact. But to make this part of our Action Plan a reality, clubs also need to ask some tough questions.

Are clubs truly looking at local needs?

Are they engaging the right people and organizations, measuring the results, and reevaluating their approaches when they don't work?

Are they sharing methods widely with others when we are getting results?

So, even if you can't honestly answer yes to all those questions, the very act of asking them shows you are thinking about our future. And the good news is that we learn over time what sorts of projects result in lasting change and which ones don't.

We know that impact is not about giving only textbooks or desks or laptops to schools. Instead it's about providing the right teacher training, materials, and access to electricity and the internet.

We know that impact is not about planting trees without thinking about biodiversity, or about donating medical equipment unsuited for resource-strapped hospitals.

So when we talk about impact at Rotary today, what do we mean?

Well, let me share an example from the Caribbean of how measuring our work helps us amplify our impact.

Mako Williams is an educational trainer working on a global grant in Antigua. She knows the importance of local conditions. She also knows that the island's schools are open-air to best suit the tropical climate.

And when she steps into the classrooms of those schools, she knows that the moist sea air means that computers have a lifespan of only four years. This is half their normal lifespan. So the Rotary Foundation grant provides a computer maintenance technician who is on call for the schools it is supporting.

It provides computers and, in coordination with the Ministry of Education, high-speed internet. The grant will also train 200 or more teachers, with an emphasis on different learning styles and technology, to better reach at least 3,000 students.

Unfortunately, many projects at Rotary stop there. But I think you'll agree that true impact will be achieved only if these improvements lead to improved student academic performance. That is what impact is really about.

Of course, measuring impact takes time, but the members sponsoring this grant are evaluating learning outcomes with great care.

Now, the reality is that social impact is a complex field. It's not always a precise science. Evaluating what children have learned, and what they should learn, is far from straightforward. With the range of projects we take on, some solutions are easier to quantify than others.

Counting vaccines, for example, is easy. Estimating the full value of a girl's education — a girl who might otherwise be a victim of poverty or child marriage — is not.

But despite this complexity, today we have the scientific knowledge to tell us what works. Add to that the local knowledge and networks of Rotary members. Add to that our ability to convince governments and partners to work with us, and you have a formula for lasting change.

Ultimately, measuring the impact of our work is vital, not only for our credibility and our brand, but also for our most important asset: our members. Because the clubs that measure their work and make a real impact don't have a problem retaining or attracting members.

In fact, increasing our impact and enhancing our participant engagement are two closely linked priorities of our Action Plan. And at the Secretariat, we are developing the systems and tools to help our clubs measure the impact we seek.

And by measuring what you do, and collectively what we do, we can attract others — volunteers, donors, partners — who want to be part of the change we are creating in the world.

With that, let me finish where we started, with that conversation I had with my daughter.

Our aim is not just to persuade people like her who are skeptical of our ability to measure our impact. We want to reach the point where there's no question about the impact we are having, from community service to global grants.

At stake is our ability to attract future generations. And our attraction is directly, directly related to our capacity to talk with real data about positive change. Because in the development economy, measurable impact is now the dominant currency.

As an example, for Charity Navigator — the world's largest nonprofit evaluator — impact is the new gold standard. They ask not only "Are organizations well run?" but "Are they getting things done?"

And so I want to leave you with four key actions to ensure that our work has an impact on the communities we seek to serve.

One: What are you trying to solve or address? There are many ways to solve a problem, so think through those options with your communities.

Two: Test your assumptions. Think critically about whether the projects that you think are good will actually support positive change.

Three: Talk through the future state. If you go back to the project site two years later, what should be happening? Does the project still have the resources it needs to be sustainable?

And finally, four: Measure your results. Reassess whether what you are doing is helping your end goal. If not, then pivot. Share positive and humbling lessons with each other so that we can all strengthen our service.

And so I ask you to consider that our reputation, ultimately, is built on the long-term good that we do, and that will shine through if we can adapt and change.

That reputation will be nourished in the minds of those who know that we have saved lives, that we have rebuilt lives, that we have empowered people to thrive. And just like polio eradication, our projects will leave a legacy long after we have departed this earth.

So the next time my daughter asks during a ride in the car what Rotary is doing, let's make sure that she and I have a very different conversation.

Thank you, and enjoy the rest of the assembly.