

An Ambivalent Gaze at the ‘Power of Music’:

Researching the evaluation landscape of music projects with a social aim

DPP-CFM Professional Thesis

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Abstract

The number of music projects with a social aim (MPSAs) has increased globally over the last few decades. They tackle a range of issues related to health, education, social justice, and peacebuilding. However, academic research has uncovered serious issues about some MPSAs, such as sexual harassment and abuse, discrimination, and exclusion, including within widely acclaimed organisations, contradicting the outcomes they purport to achieve.

This research investigated the gap between MPSA rhetoric and reality. It finds that cognitive, material, and contextual factors hamper MPSAs from engaging in assessment processes that would enable them to show evidence of their social outcomes and impact. This, in turn, uncovers a new gap between evaluation best practices in the literature and MPSA capacities on the ground. Two approaches are presented that may help fill this gap: self-assessment methodologies and evaluation in partnership with universities.

This thesis argues that adequate evaluation and assessment processes can deliver many benefits to MPSAs. It thus recommends more pressure and advocacy be put in place to encourage MPSAs to embrace (better) evaluation processes and, concurrently, that practicable assessment methodologies in line with MPSAs' capacities are developed. The entire MPSA field would tremendously benefit from closer collaboration between scholars, practitioners, and evaluators.

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Executive Summary

Background

Music projects with a social aim (MPSAs) are on the rise globally (Sloboda et al., 2020). They use music to foster positive social change by tackling pressing issues falling into categories such as health, education, social justice, and peacebuilding (Hesser & Bartleet, 2020). However, academic research has increasingly revealed significant gaps between some projects' narratives and reality (Odena, 2022). Large organisations using music to purportedly bring children and youth out of poverty and discrimination were found doing the exact opposite, for example (Baker, 2014). This issue is important beyond the suffering of project participants. It may tear down the reputation of the entire MPSA field, which many believe holds great potential to contribute positively to social change at the local, community and systemic levels (B. L. Bartleet, 2023). This research focuses on the gap between MPSA rhetoric and reality to understand its causes and to find possible ways to address it.

Thesis Statement

This thesis finds cognitive, material, and contextual factors hamper MPSAs from better assessing their projects, which can create a gap between claims about the social outcomes and impact they purportedly produce and their ability to support these with evidence. These findings, in turn, reveal another gap between the evaluation best practices found in the literature and what MPSAs can afford to roll out. This research calls for increased pressure and advocacy to encourage MPSAs to step up their evaluation practices, but also for the development of assessment approaches more in line with the capacities and realities of MPSAs on the ground.

Methodology

The methodology for this thesis was essentially rooted in qualitative research and involved: An extensive review of the literature on music for social change, (international) development, and monitoring and evaluation; Ten online interviews with scholars (4) and practitioners (4) from the field of music for social change, and evaluation experts (2); And a survey sent to 30 organisations running MPSAs to which 12 organisations from 9 countries replied. The research was conducted part-time over four months.

Findings

This thesis finds that three main factors prevent MPSAs from conducting (more) evaluations:

- Cognitive factors: The belief that the ‘power of music’ ineluctably leads to positive outcomes, the lack of perceived value of assessment processes, and the lack of critical thinking skills can individually or in combination lead to overlook evaluation.
- Material factors: Despite their willingness to do so, some MPSAs do not have the time and money to invest in assessment procedures to measure their outcomes and impact.
- Contextual factors: MPSAs often operate in complex settings defined by violence, unstable (in)formal politics, and other unpredictable challenges. From these contexts emerge pressing issues that frequently take precedence over assessment procedures.

Recommendations

This thesis argues that MPSAs’ claims should be supported with corresponding evidence, which adequate assessment processes can provide. Evaluation can bring many benefits to MPSAs, from improved work quality to increased staff skills and funding opportunities.

More pressure and advocacy are needed to encourage MPSAs to embrace (better) evaluation, and practicable assessment methodologies in line with MPSAs’ capacities shall be developed. Two approaches holding the potential to bridge the gap between evaluation best practices and MPSAs realities are proposed below:

- Partnerships with universities can provide the skills and resources MPSAs lack to conduct thorough evaluations. Academia brings the critical thinking skills and external view required for sound and accountable evaluations and may bear (part of) their costs. Yet, adequate preparation, context analysis and risk assessment are paramount.
- Practicable self-assessment methodologies should be developed for projects that do not require or cannot afford a full evaluation. These should be adaptable to the challenging contexts where many MPSAs operate. A simplified Most Significant Change (Davies & Dart, 2005) methodology appears worth considering as it is already successfully used by multiple organisations running and supporting MPSAs globally.

Further collaboration between scholars, practitioners, and evaluators could be instrumental in developing and testing the assessment approaches MPSAs need to move forward.