Eurodiaconia

AGM Workshop on Impact measurement in the social Economy and Implications on the Ground

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Why do we need to measure the impact of our activities? ...or rather, why are we asked to measure the impact of our activities?

When I was asked to speak at this workshop, I wondered what a small entity like the Waldensian Church, like the Waldensian Diaconia, could contribute in this context and on this topic.

The European Community document "Measure, Manage and Maximise Your Impact - A guide for the social economy" is very detailed and comprehensive; it's hard to add anything to it.

But the question remains: why do we need to measure the impact of our activities? What's the point? Who benefits?

The European Community document helps us answer because it states it very clearly:

Measuring the social impact of social economy entities is essential for several reasons. First of all, it allows us to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of social interventions, thus helping to justify the funding of these entities and, in fact, to justify their existence. Impact measurement also helps improve transparency and accountability towards funders and the communities served.

However, when I tried to apply these thoughts to the small reality of the Waldensian Diaconia, I realized that it's not always straightforward and simple, and that it comes with risks. I want to share these thoughts with you by recounting some experiences from our diaconal work.

There are three elements I'd like to focus on.

1. Qualitative / Quantitative Measurements

The first element concerns what we measure.

We know that for profit-making activities that produce goods, it's easy to measure and evaluate their work: if you're a company that builds furniture, at the end of the production process there must be a piece of furniture; if you spent 10 and earned 100, you did your job well. Simple.

What, on the other hand, is the expected result for, say, an educational intervention with a minor in distress? For example, a result could be that this minor manages to complete their studies; and maybe after some time they also manage to find a job… but perhaps they would have done the same even without the educational intervention. We can't know. Evaluating our work, identifying expected results, verifying indicators, is very complicated.

Precisely because it's complicated, for social economy entities, we talk about qualitative rather than quantitative indicators, we talk about the quality of relationships, we talk about beneficiary satisfaction, we talk about mutual trust and cooperation …and so on. All elements that are difficult to measure …even if…

Very often when we talk about qualitative measures, qualitative indicators, we end up doing a quantitative assessment anyway. For example:

- We can assess the perceived improvement in the living conditions of beneficiaries. …but how many beneficiaries have perceived an improvement in their living conditions?
- We can appreciate and be happy about a reduced dependence on social welfare subsidies. …but by how much has it decreased?
- We can perceive progress in the soft and hard skills of disadvantaged people: …but how many people have improved?

And these changes, these social impacts, that we produce with our activities, who do they benefit?

- Is it a good result for us operators? …so we can be satisfied with our work.
- Is it a good result for those who fund the projects? …so they can demonstrate that the funds provided have not been in vain.
- Is it a good result for those who benefit from the change? …certainly.

Depending on the point of view, however, the necessary dimension to be satisfied changes. So what is our experience as a small Protestant diaconal entity? I'll tell you three examples that illustrate the dimension – qualitative? quantitative? You decide… – of the things we do.

Sea Watch 3

In January 2019, two ships (the Sea-Watch 3 and the Sea-Eye) rescued 49 people in the Mediterranean between Christmas and New Year's Eve. These ships remained without a safe port to dock at for 19 days. The Italian government, and in particular the then Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, continued to deny entry into Italy (or Europe?) to the people rescued by the Sea Watch 3.

After lengthy negotiations, on January 8, 2019, the Sea Watch 3 issue was resolved mainly thanks to a diplomatic agreement between several European Union countries (Italy, Germany, France, Portugal, Luxembourg, Romania and Malta), which agreed to redistribute the 49 migrants on board. Despite this decision, Italy was still not ready to welcome these people. Faced with this stalemate, the Waldensian Church, on January 10, through the "humanitarian corridors" managed with the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI), offered to welcome some of the migrants, proposing itself directly to overcome the impasse.

I don't remember how many people the Waldensian Diaconia welcomed, but as you can understand, the number is not important. 49 people, for 7 European states, is very few; yet they remained at sea waiting for 20 days. Was the government, with which the church has institutional relations in any case, happy for the Waldensian intervention? No… it wasn't.

What did we do? We gave a sign. Just that. We were present in a complicated moment and we tried to give a sign.

Mediterranean Hope

A second example. It always has to do with migrants.

The Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, through the funding of the "eight per thousand" (I'll explain later what kind of funding it is), has for several years set up a project called Mediterranean Hope.

This project provides humanitarian corridors to welcome people who come mainly from refugee camps in Lebanon.

What does it consist of: a protocol is signed between the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, FCEI, and Tavola Valdese. Thanks to this protocol, people working for MH are sent to Lebanon and, in collaboration with the local authorities, come into contact with the refugees. Among these, those situations that need more support are identified and for these situations the ‘humanitarian corridor’ is activated. This simply means that these people come to Italy by plane, they are given a house, they are taught the language, we look for a job or training courses together with them. In the first three protocols (2016-2017, 2018-2019, 2022-2023; other protocols are currently underway) a total of 3,000 people arrived in Italy, of which 1,539 were welcomed by FCEI and the Waldensian Diaconia. Some welcomes went well, others didn't.

Are 1,539 people in 6 years many? Are they few?

From 2020 to 2024, Italy recorded significant variations in the number of sea arrivals of migrants. Here is a summary of the available data:

Year	People landed in Italy	Estimated deaths in the Mediterranean (deaths in the central Mediterranean in brackets)
2020	34.000	1.409 (955)
2021	67.000	2.078 (1.545)
2022	105.000	2.439 (1.452)
2023	153.000	3.129
2024	66.300	2.500

UNHCR data

In 6 years we have welcomed 1,539 people as Diaconia. (the others were welcomed by the Community of S. Egidio, another project partner).

We gave these people a house. We sent them to school to learn the language, a trade, to increase their confidence. We made sure they could be treated. We helped them find a job.

For many migrants, for many people, this path has been a success (they work, they have a house, they are autonomous). For many people this path has not worked. It was a failure. How many? ...I can give you the numbers but, it's not important.

The question, however, is the same: was it worth it? Is it worth it? What would the indicators provided by the European Community document tell us...? Do the results of the Mediterranean Hope project justify its funding? ...its existence?

(I think so) ...but you understand that it's not easy...

Also in this case the Diaconia, the church, is present in a complex historical framework and offers a way of doing things different from the official one.

What are we doing? We are trying to give a sign.

Agreement Foresteria Valdese of Florence – Meyer Hospital

The third example is a story that happened during the pandemic.

As you know, I am the Director of several accommodation facilities of the Waldensian Diaconia. In Florence, the Meyer Children's Hospital (a hospital renowned throughout Italy) contacted me because they needed to have a place to accommodate their patients, minors with their families, in case they tested positive for Covid 19 but were asymptomatic.

It wasn't the first time we had been asked this: we had already offered to turn some of our facilities into what were then called health hotels.

We offered our availability. And so we started preparing. We identified a suitable wing of the Foresteria in Florence. We organized how to get the food. We trained people who, with protective suits and masks, could collect the garbage, change the sheets, bring the food... We were ready.

Do you know how many people we hosted? ...zero. No one arrived.

At the end of the emergency I received a phone call from the director of the pediatric hospital. On the phone he apologized because no one had arrived (he seemed to say "we're sorry but very few people got sick!"). I had to 'console' him... And I had to say to him "you don't have to apologize, because we, together, did a great thing... We did what had to be done... We were ready."

Many resources, energy, money spent. Zero people helped.

If we evaluate this project with any criteria, well it's a failure.

And if it's a failure, next time (and I've already said on other occasions that I think there will be another time) we shouldn't repeat it. We shouldn't do anything. And we'll be wrong.

Funding, Transparency, and Accountability

The second element of risk concerns the economic resources we utilize to carry out our projects.

The European Community document clearly states that measuring the value and effectiveness of social interventions by social economy entities, or in our case, by the Diaconia, serves to justify the funding of these entities. This is a common understanding: securing funding for our activities is a legitimate and essential concern. Without funding, we cannot perform our work.

I believe we must be mindful of one crucial aspect: we must avoid the real risk of merely fulfilling the expectations of our funders. This means avoiding the modification of our activities solely to meet funding requirements, which could ultimately compromise our core identity.

We risk "bending" our activities to ensure that the measurement of the value and effectiveness of our interventions aligns with the demands of our funders.

If the Diaconia's funding originates directly from the church it represents, this is less problematic, as there is an alignment of intentions and identity.

However, if the funding comes from a public body or a private one, such as banks, foundations, or philanthropists, it can pose a challenge. The question then becomes: who determines what is important?

I am not familiar with the funding mechanisms for Diaconias in various countries, but to illustrate my point, I will describe a public funding system in Italy, not for the Diaconia, but for churches. The Waldensian Church accepted this state funding on the condition that it would not be used for church-related activities. This may seem unusual, but it is true.

The Waldensian Church has consistently advocated for the separation of church and state, opposing state funding for ecclesiastical activities. It has maintained that the church should be self-supporting through contributions from its members, a practice it continues to uphold.

When the opportunity to receive the "eight per thousand" (Otto Per Mille) funding arose, the Waldensian Church faced a crisis and engaged in a lengthy and difficult debate. In 1993, the Waldensian Church signed an agreement with the Italian state to accept this funding, but only after the state agreed to a specific condition, which was subsequently enacted into law. The Waldensian Church accepted the funding on the understanding that it would be used exclusively for social projects, not for church activities.

Otto Per Mille

The "8x1000" is a portion of income tax that Italian citizens can allocate to the state or a recognized religious denomination. This measure was introduced in 1984, as part of the Concordat between the Italian Republic and the Catholic Church.

The law stipulates that a fraction (precisely 8 per thousand) of the total tax revenue is used to support religious denominations or allocated to the state for social or welfare purposes. The distribution of this revenue among the various religious denominations and the state is determined by taxpayer preference. When filing their tax returns, taxpayers can indicate their chosen recipient by signing. The total amount is then divided based on the number of signatures received.

In Italy, the Catholic Church naturally receives the largest number of signatures, approximately 70 percent (although this percentage is declining). This represents about one billion euros.

The state itself receives the second-highest number of signatures, approximately 25 percent (and this percentage is growing).

The Waldensian Church, despite its small size, receives about 3 percent of the signatures. This translates to approximately 480,000 to 500,000 people. Although the Waldensian Church has only 15,000 members, it receives funding corresponding to about 40 million euros.

Each year, the Waldensian Church issues a call for proposals and receives thousands of project applications from various entities, both within Italy and internationally. The church funds projects that are not necessarily Waldensian and are unrelated to the church itself. However, these projects share a common vision, objective, or "sign," as the Waldensian Church carefully selects which projects to support.

Why do 500,000 people, many of whom are not Waldensian, choose to allocate their funds to the Waldensian Church?

1. One reason is the church's commitment to its core principle: self-sufficiency. The funds received from the state are "given back" to the citizens through social activities that are open to everyone, without compromise.

2. The Otto Per Mille funds received by the Waldensian and Methodist Church support educational programs, social-health interventions, and international cooperation projects. All support is directed towards others; no funds are used for religious purposes, such as the construction or maintenance of churches or the payment of pastors' salaries.

3. Another reason is the Waldensian Church's transparency in reporting how the Otto Per Mille funds are distributed. Detailed reports on funded projects are available on the church's website.

Approximately 60 percent (25 million euros) of the funds received are allocated to projects in Italy, and 40 percent (15 million euros) to projects abroad.

In this instance, the Waldensian Church had to inform the state that "your system does not work for us. It needs to be modified." Fortunately, we were able to engage with receptive individuals who were willing to explore alternative approaches.

Is this willingness always present? No. Our experience is an example of successfully changing a state's perspective. However, it is more common for funding bodies to adhere to their established frameworks.

What is the solution? Should we adapt to the models proposed by funders, or should we emulate the Waldensians and maintain our principles?

Is the European Community prepared to listen to the needs of European Diaconias? Is it willing to be flexible enough to accommodate the diverse realities of European Diaconias?

In Italy, our Waldensian insistence has proven beneficial, as we are now both recognizable and recognized. We also strive to maintain consistency and transparency in our operations.

3. Communicating Results / Identity

The third element of risk concerns how we communicate what we do.

A central and interesting point of the European document is the communication of our activities.

The document emphasizes that, despite social economy entities having a well-defined social mission, they may encounter difficulties in describing their change strategy, which links the implemented activities to the expected impacts. It is essential for these entities not only to have clarity on their mission but also to be able to translate this mission into concrete impact objectives through a change narrative.

I really like this idea of a change narrative. This narrative helps to outline the theoretical relationships between "what is done" (the actions taken) and "what is sought to be changed" (the impact objectives), thus making the real implications of their activities for beneficiaries and involved stakeholders more understandable. Consequently, translating the social mission into a change narrative is a crucial step to facilitate impact measurement and its communication.

To reiterate, I really like this idea of a change narrative. I believe it should be taken very seriously because it connects who we are with what we do and, therefore, with what we expect to change, with the objectives we set for ourselves.

Again, I wondered for whom we should produce this narrative. I wondered if we produce it for ourselves, to ensure consistency between our actions and our identity and mission, or if we should produce this narrative to meet the expectations of those who fund our activities.

Perhaps both are true.

Often, reports on the results achieved through a specific project and on the objectives that were intended to be achieved are very useful tools and are very interesting to read, study, and publish. However, I also believe that they primarily serve those working in the field (both within and outside the organization) or are useful for initiatives such as conferences or meetings like this one, or as an account of completed activities for funders.

If, on the other hand, we want to make the reality in which we work, the activities we carry out, and the objectives we set for ourselves known to an audience different from those already working in the same areas and familiar with our work, we realize that it is very difficult. In other words, how do we communicate to the 'world' what we do?

I assure you that for a small entity like the Waldensian Diaconia, it is even more challenging. We could buy advertising space on television networks, create numerous internet pages, or publish thousands of posts on social media. However, we would still risk getting lost in a vast sea of undifferentiated information, potentially failing to truly communicate what we do and why. So, should we refrain from doing so? No, of course, we do engage in these activities, and in some ways, they are helpful. But we must also explore other alternatives.

How do we make ourselves known to those who are not already aware of us?

A Borderline Case: the Waldensian Houses

I will explain briefly why the Waldensian Diaconia also includes the Waldensian Houses, which are accommodation facilities (hotels and guesthouses). These are the facilities that I manage.

- **Funding:** One of the objectives of the Waldensian Houses is, of course, purely economic. The Waldensian Houses exist to generate profits. These profits are then used to fund the social activities of the Waldensian Diaconia. Therefore, they are not used to enrich any individual but to contribute to activities that benefit everyone, as the social activities of the Waldensian Diaconia are open to all. This is why we describe our offerings as solidarity holidays.

- **Service to the Church:** Another objective of the Waldensian Houses is to provide a service to the Waldensian Church. We host meetings, conferences, and the synod of the Waldensian Church. We are at the service of the church, and we promote its activities.

- **An Open Window:** Finally, we aim to be an open window onto the Waldensian world and the Waldensian Diaconia. In our hotels, we host people who come to us by chance, who book through platforms like booking.com, or who choose us simply because we are affordable. Upon arrival, they realize (though not everyone; some are too distracted to notice anything) that they are in buildings with a unique history. They discover that the people working in these hotels treat them not just as customers but as guests. They learn that their stay, their vacation, not only allows them to rest and relax but also supports social activities that defend the most vulnerable and those with special needs.

How do we know that this transformation, this magic of turning a foreigner, an outsider, a stranger, into a guest, actually happens? It may seem insignificant, but we receive messages, we read online reviews, and we talk to people. We engage in conversations, dedicate time to them, and build relationships – the same approach we use to transform a stranger into a guest.

How many people notice the Waldensian Diaconia, its mission, its work, and its achievements? I don't know. Truly, I don't know.

But I know it does happen. To illustrate how I know this, I will read you a single comment we received on Google. It is not the only positive comment, but this one comment alone helps us understand that we are doing good work. It makes us understand that sometimes our change narrative does reach someone. It is the comment of a German lady who, after staying at one of our facilities, wrote on Google:

> "If you are on the trail of the Waldensians, you will not encounter luxury. The furnishings are simple, the rooms are clean, the people are loving."

What do we do with the Waldensian Houses? A small thing: we try to leave a sign.

Conclusions

So, why is it necessary to measure the impact of our activities? All the reasons outlined in the European Community document are valid, significant, and should be studied and pursued.

Three reasons to follow the guidelines:

- To understand (ourselves) if what we are doing aligns with our initial intentions.
- To force ourselves to engage with the real world and avoid remaining isolated within our organizations → Self-referentiality.
- To learn to communicate our work effectively → change narrative.

However, I believe that measuring the impact of our activities does not, in itself, "justify the existence of our activities."

The Diaconia does not exist because its impact measurement (and it certainly has an impact) reveals grandiose dimensions – thus making it worthy of funding and, consequently, worthy of existing –, or because it can replace the state – therefore pleasing the state with its existence –, or because it has a considerable economic impact – even if it is obviously non-profit. The Diaconia exists if it has something to say.

The Diaconia exists because it has something to say. It has something relevant to say today, in this specific historical moment and situation. And it has a significant impact because it manages to find meaningful gestures and signs that are simple yet extraordinary.

We, as Diaconia, as churches, must not seek the answer to why we undertake certain activities solely in the indicators that measure our social economy. We must have another WHY. We must be able to answer the questions: "Why do we choose to do certain activities and not others?" and "Why is the existence of the Diaconia important?" → This is our fundamental question. In the answer to this question, we find the true measure of our impact.