



Demonstrating the Impact of Scouting

World Scouting Think Tank briefing #3

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This briefing summarises the discussion held during the World Scouting Think Tank session on 2 July 2026, which focused on the social impact of Scouting: how the movement can define impact more clearly, measure it in ways that are meaningful, and communicate its value credibly to different audiences without losing sight of its educational mission.

The real challenge is making Scouting's impact clear and visible

Scouting does not usually struggle to believe in its own impact. Across the movement, leaders, volunteers, parents, partners, and former Scouts can point to stories of young people gaining confidence, finding purpose, taking responsibility, serving communities, and growing into active citizens. These stories are not incidental. They are part of the reason why Scouting continues to matter.

The more difficult question is whether Scouting can demonstrate this impact in ways that are clear, credible, and useful. Membership numbers, hours of service, events delivered, badges earned, trees planted, or projects completed can all be important. They show activity, scale, and reach. But they do not always show change. They do not explain what young people learned, how communities were strengthened, or whether the effects of an activity endured beyond the moment in which it took place.

This distinction matters because Scouting is an educational movement. Its value is not only in the activity delivered, but in the development that activity makes possible. A camp, a patrol meeting, a community service project, or a leadership role may look simple from the outside. The educational impact lies in what happens through the experience: confidence, judgement, cooperation, resilience, empathy, responsibility, agency, and commitment to others.

The challenge, then, is not to prove that Scouting is full of activities. It is to become better at explaining how Scouting develops knowledge and skills and changes people and communities.

Impact needs a clearer purpose before it needs more indicators

A central reflection is that impact measurement cannot begin only with tools. Before deciding what to measure, Scouting needs to be clearer about why it is measuring. The same information can serve very different purposes depending on the audience and the decision it is meant to inform.

For internal audiences, impact evidence can help NSOs and local groups improve their programmes, strengthen adult support, review priorities, and understand whether they are delivering on the mission of Scouting. For external audiences, it can help parents, governments, donors, schools, partners, and communities see the value of non-formal education in a language they recognise and trust. These purposes are connected, but not identical. A story that inspires a parent may not satisfy a government funder. A set of statistics that helps a donor assess scale may not help a local group understand whether young people feel a stronger sense of belonging. A technical evaluation may be useful for policy discussions, but too distant from the lived experience of volunteers and young people.

A sceptical parent may be most convinced by visible changes in their child, supported by credible stories from other families. A government minister may want evidence of scale, alignment with public priorities, and contribution to policy outcomes. A private donor may place greater weight on quantitative evidence and rigorous evaluation methods, potentially including a randomised controlled trial. [World Scouting's From Intent to Impact: Introducing Impact of Scouting](#) provides a useful starting point for understanding these different expectations.

The distinction between internal and external use should be explicit. Internally, impact measurement should help Scouting improve what it does. Externally, it should help Scouting demonstrate its value. Evidence collected for one purpose may support the other, but it should not be assumed that the same evidence will automatically fulfil both purposes.

This means that Scouting should avoid the temptation of creating one universal impact measure that is expected to answer every question. A stronger approach would begin with purpose: what do we need to know, for whom, and what will we do with the answer? Once that is clear, indicators, stories, tools, and communication formats can be selected more intelligently.

The three levels are useful, but not enough on their own

Three broad levels of impact can be identified as a starting point: individual, community, and institutional. These are helpful because they reflect the different ways Scouting seeks to contribute to its Mission. It supports the development of individual young people and adults. It strengthens communities through service and local action. It contributes to society through citizenship, advocacy, peace, sustainability, and recognition of non-formal education.

However, these levels are only a starting framework. Within each level, different kinds of impact need to be distinguished. At the individual level, for example, there is the impact that Scouting has on a young person, and there is also the impact that young person later has on others because of what they gained through Scouting. The same applies to adults. Volunteering in Scouting, besides its main purpose of enabling a learning environment, has positive effects on the individual, but it may also strengthen the wider culture of volunteering in a community. These levels of individual impact then contribute to community impact.

At community level, impact can mean many things: increased social cohesion, better access to clean water, more inclusive participation, environmental improvement, stronger youth voice, or a safer space for children and young people. At the institutional level, impact may involve policy influence, recognition of non-formal education, contribution to national youth ecosystems, or the long-term formation of active citizens. The three levels therefore need to be treated as a map, not as final definitions. They help Scouting see the territory, but more precise pathways are needed to understand what change is expected, how it happens, and what evidence would show that it is taking place.

Counting activity is not the same as understanding change

Scouting can count many things to demonstrate progress or success. It can count members, leaders, hours of service, training sessions, projects, camps, certificates, badges, awards, and participants. These are useful measures, especially for showing reach and scale. They can also be powerful when communicating with audiences that need to understand the size of the movement.

But the discussion returns several times to the limits of activity data. A tree planted is an output. A tree that survives, creates shade, improves a community space, and becomes part of a young person's understanding of environmental responsibility is closer to impact. A number of hours served may be impressive, but it does not automatically show whether the service was meaningful, whether it responded to a real need, or whether it changed the young people and communities involved.

This is the familiar difference between outputs and outcomes, but in Scouting it has a particular educational importance. The movement often works through experiences whose effects unfold over time. A young person may only recognise years later that a patrol leadership role helped them learn to manage conflict, listen to others, speak with confidence, or take initiative. A community may only see the full benefit of a project after it has been maintained, adopted, or repeated.

This does not mean Scouting should stop counting activity. It means activity data should be connected to a clearer theory of change. The question should not only be: what did we do? It should also be: what changed because of what we did, for whom, and how do we know?

Scouting needs a language bridge between internal experience and external recognition

One of the strongest themes is the need for translation. Scouting has a rich internal language. It speaks about patrols, badges, camps, service, Promise and Law, youth leadership, progression, and adult support. This language is meaningful inside the movement, but it is not always understood by people outside it.

A young person may say he/she is able to lead because those skills were developed by being a patrol leader. But an employer, parent, government official, or potential partner may not immediately understand what that means. Translated into wider language, that same experience means team leadership, responsibility for peers, planning, communication, conflict management, problem-solving, and values-based decision-making. The experience does not change, but the way it is expressed makes the learning visible.

The same is true for adult volunteering. Scouting often describes adult contribution in movement-specific terms, while wider society may better understand mentoring, safeguarding, project management, youth development, community leadership, training design, event management, partnership-building, and local governance.

This translation should not reduce Scouting to a set of generic competencies. Its educational identity is deeper than that. But a clearer language bridge can help others recognise what Scouting contributes. It can also help Scouts and volunteers recognise

their own growth while they are still inside the movement, rather than only understanding it years later.

Stories matter, but they need structure

Stories are very powerful and they can show human change in a way that numbers alone cannot. A young person who gained confidence, a volunteer who found purpose, a community that became safer or more connected, or a former Scout who continues to serve society can make Scouting's value feel real and understandable. Yet stories are strongest when they are not isolated anecdotes. They need structure. A good impact story should help the audience understand the starting point, the Scouting experience, the change that occurred, and the evidence that supports the claim. It should show not only that something good happened, but why Scouting contributed to it.

This matters because different audiences need different forms of confidence. Parents may be persuaded by visible changes in their children and by trusted voices from their community. Donors and governments may need a combination of stories, data, and credible methods. NSOs may need evidence that helps them decide what to improve. Young people may need language that helps them reflect on their own learning and agency.

The future of impact communication is therefore not stories versus data. It is stories with data, and data made meaningful through stories. Scouting needs a menu of evidence formats that can be used for different purposes while remaining rooted in the same educational mission.

Impact is also a tool for learning inside Scouting

A valuable distinction emerges between measuring impact to report what has happened and measuring impact to guide what happens next. In education, this is similar to the difference between assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Both are useful, but they serve different purposes.

If impact measurement is used only at the end of a project, it risks becoming a reporting exercise. It may help satisfy a donor or complete a document, but it may not change practice. If it is used during the life of a programme, it can help leaders and volunteers understand whether young people are growing, whether activities are meaningful, and whether adjustments are needed.

This suggests that Scouting should not see impact only as an external accountability requirement. It can also be part of the educational process. Young people can be invited to reflect on what they have learned, how they have changed, what contribution they have made, and how they want to act differently in the future or which activities they would like to try. Adults can use similar reflection to understand their own growth and the quality of the learning environment they are creating.

This kind of reflective practice is not a substitute for formal evaluation, but it is deeply aligned with the Scout Method. It makes learning visible while it is happening. It helps young people become more conscious of their development. It also creates a stronger

foundation for later evidence, because Scouts and leaders are already naming the change they experience.

Different contexts require different expressions of impact

Another reflection relates to the risk of treating impact as though it looks the same everywhere. Communities differ widely, even within the same country. A Scout group in a small rural community may create impact in different ways from a group in a large city. An NSO working in a context where non-formal education is already recognised may need different evidence from an NSO working where Scouting must first explain its basic educational value.

This does not mean that Scouting cannot have a global approach. It means that a global approach must be flexible enough to respect context. Shared principles can sit alongside locally relevant indicators. A common framework can guide NSOs, while still allowing them to choose themes that matter in their setting, such as inclusion, peacebuilding, environmental action, youth leadership, wellbeing, employability, or active citizenship. Thematic pathways may be especially useful. Rather than trying to measure everything at once, NSOs could focus on a theme, define the change they expect, identify the people affected, and select a manageable set of indicators and stories. Over time, these thematic studies could be aggregated to build a richer global picture of Scouting's contribution.

This would also help avoid evidence fatigue. Many volunteers and young people are already asked to complete surveys, forms, and reports. Impact measurement should be proportionate, meaningful, and useful to those who provide the information. If tools feel distant from practice, they are less likely to be used well.

Finally, a global narrative can be built from the amalgamation of credible local evidence. A programme or intervention that works well in one setting cannot automatically be assumed to work in another. However, when a similar intervention repeatedly produces positive results across different geographical, cultural, and organisational contexts, the movement can begin to build a stronger global case for its effectiveness.

Impact and cost-effectiveness

Another important angle relates to the *cost* (taken in general terms) associated with impact. Positive impact alone does not tell funders which intervention makes the best use of limited resources. Cost-effectiveness helps compare worthwhile programmes according to both their results and their costs. Even if a community action project produces improvements, for example, in participants' citizenship and sustainable development competencies, if that comes with a high cost per participant, it can weaken the case for additional funding or funding from other sources. The findings then should help to reshape the programme to reach more young people more efficiently. This is not about presenting volunteers as "cheap labour." It is about directing resources towards effective interventions, identifying underfunded programmes, and mobilising funds to close the gaps.

Adults are part of Scouting's impact, not only its delivery system

In the Scouting realm, it is important that impact measurement not focus only on young people. Adults in Scouting are often treated only as the people who deliver the programme, but they are also affected by Scouting and can become a source of wider community impact.

Adult volunteers may develop confidence, skills, friendships, leadership capacity, community connection, and a stronger commitment to service. They may also carry the values and practices of Scouting into other parts of society. In this sense, Scouting can act as a pipeline for volunteering and civic engagement, not only by forming young people but also by shaping adults who continue to contribute beyond the movement.

This is particularly important at a time when many societies are concerned about civic participation, trust, and social fragmentation. Scouting's adult community can be a practical example of service, intergenerational cooperation, and local leadership. But this impact will remain under-recognised if adults are only counted as resources rather than understood as learners, leaders, and citizens.

A fuller impact approach would therefore ask not only what adults enable for young people, but what Scouting enables in adults and through adults for the wider community.

One approach would be to understand Scouting's impact on and through adults across four connected dimensions:

- Individual (internal and external): Former Scouts can provide evidence of Scouting's long-term influence on civic engagement, service, and volunteering.
- Individual (external): Showing how volunteering supports adults' personal and professional development can strengthen recruitment and retention.
- Community (external): Adults carry Scout values into their families, workplaces, communities, and other organisations.
- Indirect impact on young people: As mentors and role models, well-supported and trained adults are essential to programme quality and youth outcomes.

A realistic starting point for World Scouting

With the previous reflections in mind, one can ask a practical question: "Where should World Scouting focus now if this topic is to be addressed?" The main advice may be not to address everything at once. Impact is too broad, and the risk of creating an overly complex system is real. A more useful starting point would be concrete, modest, and connected to Scouting's mission.

This could mean, for example, developing a simple global impact framework that clarifies the main levels of change, the main audiences for evidence, and the difference between outputs, outcomes, and longer-term impact. This framework should be light enough for NSOs to use, but clear enough to create shared language across the movement.

A second step could be to support a small number of thematic pilots. These could focus on areas where Scouting already has strong relevance and where external audiences also see value, such as youth leadership, wellbeing, community service, environmental action, inclusion, or active citizenship. Each pilot could combine simple indicators, structured stories, and reflection tools for young people and adults.

A third step could be to create a translation guide for Scouting impact. This would help NSOs express Scout experiences in language understood by parents, governments, donors, schools, employers, and partners. It would not replace Scout language internally, but it would help make the educational value of Scouting more visible externally.

Moving forward

If, in the Scout Movement (at any level), one wants to strengthen how we understand, demonstrate, and use evidence of our social impact, where can we start? Given the breadth of the topic, the best move is probably not to create a comprehensive system all at once, but to begin with a focused and proportionate approach rooted in Scouting's educational mission. The six directions below are mutually reinforcing elements of this approach rather than a rigid sequence.

Possible directions	What this could mean in practice
Clarify the purpose of impact evidence	Distinguish evidence for learning, improvement, accountability, advocacy, fundraising, and public communication.
Use the three levels as a map	Keep individual, community, and institutional impact as a shared frame, while allowing more precise thematic pathways beneath each level.
Connect outputs to outcomes and ultimately impacts	Continue to count activity, but link it to the change expected and the evidence needed to understand whether change occurred.
Build a translation guide	Help NSOs express Scout experiences in language recognised by parents, governments, donors, schools, employers, and partners.
Pilot manageable themes	Start with a small number of priority themes, using simple indicators, structured stories, and reflective tools.
Protect the educational mission	Use impact evidence to strengthen Scouting's purpose and method, not to chase indicators detached from the movement's identity.

Table 1: Six mutually reinforcing priorities for World Scouting.

Across all these directions, WOSM should prioritise building capacity for impact measurement at NSO level and helping NSOs use the resulting evidence for internal learning, external communication, and the mobilisation of new funding and partnerships. The aim should not simply be to collect more information centrally, but

to ensure that evidence leads to better programmes, clearer communication, and stronger decisions throughout the movement.

Keeping the mission at the centre

A final important reflection is that impact measurement should serve Scouting's mission, not distract from it. The movement should not chase indicators simply because they are easy to count or attractive to a particular funder. Nor should it allow external expectations to define its educational purpose.

At the same time, Scouting cannot assume that its value is self-evident. The movement needs stronger evidence, clearer language, and more confident communication. It needs to show how non-formal education contributes to young people's development, community wellbeing, and social change. It needs to make visible what many Scouts already know from experience.

This requires both humility and confidence. Humility, because Scouting should be willing to learn from evidence, recognise variation, and improve where impact is weaker than intended. Confidence, because the movement has a distinctive educational contribution that is highly relevant to the needs of young people and society today.

The task ahead is not only to measure more, but to measure better. It is to understand better, communicate more clearly, and use evidence to strengthen the experience of Scouting itself. If Scouting can do this well, impact measurement will not become an administrative burden. It will become a way of telling the truth about the change Scouting helps create, and a way of making that change stronger.

Additional thoughts from Dominique B nard: *The Impact of Scouting: Some Thoughts and Suggestions*

Dominique B nard’s paper *“The Impact of Scouting: Some Thoughts and Suggestions”* complements the reflections of the Think Tank on the topic by arguing that measuring Scouting’s impact is not merely a technical exercise but a question that affects the movement’s entire educational strategy. Rather than focusing primarily on educational intentions, participation figures, or resources invested, Dominique proposes assessing the competencies young people develop and their ability to apply knowledge, practical skills, and interpersonal skills to create positive change in their lives and communities. This requires Scouting organisations to evaluate the quality of the educational opportunities they provide, including the relevance and appeal of activities, young people’s participation in decision-making, and the support and resources available to adult leaders. All of this affects different people and communities in different ways.

The paper also emphasises that membership growth alone is an insufficient measure of success. Retention, progression between age sections, and participation through the senior section provide stronger indications of whether young people experience the full educational programme. Practices such as the “Rover Departure” and the collection of former Scouts’ life stories could help document the commitments, capabilities, and social contributions that emerge from this experience. Programmes serving at-risk young people are particularly valuable for impact assessment because Scouting may represent one of the few significant sources of educational support available to them. Ultimately, Dominique recommends assessing Scouting’s impact at three interconnected levels: the individual, through competencies and personal development; the family, through improved relationships and parental confidence; and society, through young people’s professional, civic, and community engagement.

The article can be accessed at [this link](#).

About the World Scouting Think Tank:

The World Scouting Think Tank brings together a select group of individuals with significant Scouting experience to serve as a sounding board for the World Scout Bureau's leadership. Their insights and experience are considered very valuable as we reflect on how Scouting can evolve to better meet the needs of young people and society throughout the implementation of the new Strategy for Scouting.

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