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Conceptualising Social Value for the Third Sector and Developing Methods for its Assessment

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Abstract

Recent legislation in the UK has placed an expectation on Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs) to consider, monitor and evaluate the societal value they generate. However, meaningful engagement with the Social Value Act by the third sector is relatively low, which reflects both conceptual and methodological shortcomings. This paper describes a programme of action research which has developed a user-friendly tool to assist smaller SPOs to explore, evidence and value the benefits that they produce for society. Conceptualising social value through the lens of the localism, personalisation, deliberative democracy and social innovation agendas, the paper describes the process and experience of applying a Social Return Assessment tool and the lessons learnt for the three SPOs involved, the third sector, and for commissioning bodies. Recommendations reflect the need for a standardised monitoring and evaluation framework tailored to specific third sector interest groups and networks.

Introduction

Social value is a way of thinking about how scarce resources are allocated and used. It involves looking beyond the price of each individual contract and examining what the collective benefit to a community is when a public body chooses to award a contract (Social Enterprise UK, 2012). In simple terms public sector organisations in the UK are required to consider the social and environmental value that can be generated through buying services, in turn ensuring that procurement decisions are influenced by the wider societal value that they generate, and not just by efficiency or cost.

In light of the austerity measures and public sector cuts that coincided with the introduction of the bill in 2010, the Social Value Act is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand it was designed to help charities and social enterprises unlock a public services market dominated by the big corporates, and to improve commissioning in a "risk-averse" public sector. But on the other demanding spending cuts have meant that public services are under greater pressure to let contracts on a lowest-cost basis. The Act could therefore be seen as a way maintaining social responsibility in an environment threatened by economic rationalisation, whilst simultaneously balancing the inevitable reduction in public services by generating greater added value from the charitable and voluntary sectors.

Whatever the driver, demonstrating social value has become a way not only for private sector companies bidding for public sector contracts to distinguish themselves from the competition, but also for voluntary sector organisations to be seen in a more favourable light by funders and commissioning bodies. But Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs), and especially smaller organizations in the third sector have faced huge difficulties in evidencing the change they produce for society. There are many technical challenges to grapple with, such as how to assess the marginal difference that a project or organization makes for society, or how to place a value on impacts which have no market price, such as health and well-being. And in pragmatic terms smaller organisations are likely to require that impact tools be readily adapted into an accessible resource not over-reliant on expert or specialist input.

While for some commentators (see for example Fujiwara (2014) the acceptance of its welfarist approach to evaluation identifies Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) as being the most appropriate method for social impact measurement, it is arguably too technical for non-experts to engage with. Particularly around valuation of market and non-market goods such as health and quality of life, which would be restricted to contingent valuation methods requiring economic expertise.

The cabinet office-recognised Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework provides one possible solution as it enables a focus on wider outcomes produced by the third sector, and enables stakeholders to tell the story of how change is created for beneficiaries, and perhaps even more importantly take ownership of this story. However, even SROI is often seen as too technical and resource

intensive to be a viable option without significant investment, and has in many ways added a further layer of burden to the challenge of demonstrating the social value of its activities. In particular, monetisation of outcomes, which allows benefits to be compared against costs on the same metric, can be attractive providing that an accessible process is developed to combine understanding of the process with the necessary rigour.

In addition to methods there is a further issue; that of Social value itself. While its introduction was arguably politically driven under the guise of the UK Coalition government's drive to create a 'Big Society', it remains poorly conceptualised with respect to its relevance to, and implications for, the third sector. And particularly the smaller SPOs within it whose position in society and the economy is multi-faceted and often driven by goals which combine individual with collective aspirations.

The study described in this paper has sought to address these challenges through a programme of action research which has enabled the sequential development and implementation of a user-friendly impact assessment tool designed to capture and measure social value. Following a brief introduction to the 2012 Social Value Act the paper develops a much needed conceptual framework for social value as it applies to the third sector, drawing on the agendas of localism, personalisation, deliberative democracy and social innovation. The action research methodology is then described, as is the process of developing an accessible Social Return Assessment (SRA) tool to enable smaller SPOs to more easily demonstrate their social value.

The paper ends with some reflections around the process and outcomes of the action research programme, with reference to further implementation of the Social Value Act, the role of SROI in developing monitoring and evaluation frameworks for social value, and the conceptual framework developed earlier in the paper. Recommendations are made for the third sector, and for its organisations seeking to promote and benefit from the demonstration of social value.

Conceptualising Social Value for the third sector

Introducing Social Value

The Public Services (Social Value) Act requires public authorities to 'have regard to economic, social and environmental well-being in connection with public services contracts; and for connected purposes'. (National Housing Federation, 2012: 2). From the limited evidence available, two strands of critique have emerged from the Social Value literature: those focusing on the technical limitations of the Act, and those that recognise barriers in the wider context of public service procurement that must be alleviated for the potential of the Social Value Act to be fully realised (SEUK, 2014)

The recent review of the Social Value Act (Cabinet Office, 2015) is of particular relevance to smaller SPOs in the third sector, many of which are well placed to deliver social value as part of their core business. Three main barriers to

achieving its full potential were identified: 1) the awareness and take up of the Social Value Act; 2) application of the Act (which is in turn underpinned by the understanding and definition of social value); and 3) the measurement of social value. In the latter regard the review found that whilst potential bidders for funding were able to articulate the social outcomes they would provide, there was a lack of consistency and rigour around how such outcomes could be quantified, thus making it more difficult for commissioning bodies to assess the additional value for money provided by a social value offer (op cit: 11).

All three barriers are arguably symptomatic of the lack of an accepted conceptual framework of what social value means to third sector organisations and how it relates it other aspects of an SPO's activities and role in wider society. The following section presents an initial framework to provide a platform for development of an impact assessment tool and more effective and systematic research into social value as it relates to the third sector.

Framing Social Value in a third sector context

The starting point for conceptualising social value as it relates to the third sector is to frame it in terms of the key agendas that help shape its role and evaluation in society, and in turn may influence the nature and extent of the social value that third sector organisations create. These agendas, taken first in turn and then together, are: Localism, Deliberative Democracy, Personalisation and Social Innovation.

Localism

In many ways localism is the most obvious place to begin this discussion given the distinct role that the third sector plays in helping to promote local identity, history and culture, as well as political economy roles relating to the support for local production and consumption and (increasingly in the UK since 2010) helping to run local public services. More generally, localism proposes the re-localizing of economic and democratic relationships to the local level on the basis that a variety of social, economic and environmental problems (for example food, health, education and green issues) will be more easily tackled. All such areas represent those where voluntary action can be quite prevalent and where third sector organisations are deliberately engaged in the spirit of localism. Well-documented examples include support for local food networks (including farmers markets, community garden centres and food cooperatives), community banks and alternative forms of exchange including timebanking and LETS systems.

In the UK the Localism Act of 2011 offers greater power and potentially less bureaucracy for local communities and smaller voluntary groups to have an influence in their local area. The Right to Bid for community assets and the Right to Challenge[1] local authorities on the delivery of local public services both imply a need for third sector organisations to articulate the social value they can generate through these activities. Indeed, according to NVCO (2015), voluntary organistions often add social value when delivering a service and this should be

recognised when decisions are made. In this way localism not only affords the sector a chance to showcase the value generated through voluntary action, but implies that it is increasingly a necessity if they are to be taken seriously as competitors to public and private delivery agencies, provided of course that the tools and processes of demonstrating this value are available.

Whilst evidencing their value is clearly important, there is a further point of context around the social value of the third sector with respect to the localism agenda. In addition to evidencing their value, voluntary organisations often need to develop their capacity and skills to increase community engagement and work successfully in partnership with local authorities and other public and private bodies that represent a variety of communities of interest as well as place (NVCO, 2015). The process of undertaking a value assessment must therefore not become an additional burden on organisations that are already overstretched. In addition it should provide some added value to the organisation, for example through its operational systems and management processes and through more effective engagement with, and understanding of, stakeholder communities. Focusing on simple metrics of social value is not going to be sufficient, especially for smaller third sector organisations that are likely to be starting from a lower base.

Deliberative Democracy

In conceptual terms there are of course important affinities between localism and deliberative democracy, which broadly concerns the democratic goal of

engaging citizens in the decisions which affect them (Ercan and Hendricks, 2013). Deliberative democracy is in effect the process that links representative and participative democracy; the former referring to elected bodies working through formal democratic structures as part of their continuous representative responsibilities, and the latter to self-identifying groups or voluntary organisations pursuing their own objectives through specific programmes or one-off projects (Owen et al, 2007).

According to Van Doosselaere (2004) the processes of deliberative democracy can improve governance, information flows, accountability and political processes and helps to give a voice to those most directly affected by public policies. However, for it to the succeed, the main drivers of participative democracy – the voluntary sector - and more especially the smaller self-organised groups within it – increasingly need to understand their beneficiary communities, and how their activities impact upon them in order to help achieve balanced outcomes for both public officials (seeking the delivery of social value through and outside the lens of the Social Value Act) and citizens themselves (Van Doosselaere, 2004).

Indeed, for deliberative democracy to succeed the distinctive role of an independent voluntary sector – characterized by small, specialist and often local voluntary organisations – needs to be recognized and maintained. According to a recent assessment by Singleton et al (2014) a focus on price, efficiencies of scale and payment by results is leading to a loss of funding for many such organizations, despite the social benefits that they bring. And in parallel the

'distinctive role of an independent voluntary sector is being steadily eroded as the public, private and voluntary sectors are increasingly being regarded as interchangeable delivery agents of the state and treated as identical in procurement and contract terms' (Op cit: 7).

The challenge for smaller third sector organisations then is not only to demonstrate social value in a robust manner that public officials and commissioning bodies will take seriously, but to do so in a way that helps demonstrate this distinctive role, as well as the independent, self-organising characteristic that underpins the success of the deliberative democratic system. Arguably what the voluntary sector needs is a common framework for the assessment of social value that respects the need for local and organisational context, flexibility and ways of articulating impact that emphasise added value with respect to wider democracy and not just efficiency in service delivery.

Personalization

The UKs Personalisation agenda is also relevant to third sector organisations when considering the social value and related outcomes that they generate. Personalisation most commonly refers to the transformation of adult social care but ultimately means making a variety of services accessible to all citizens including transport, housing and education. The central idea of the UK government's 2012 White Paper is to move away from crisis response to a situation that promotes independence and well-being (Community Care, 2008)

The principles of personalisation are being most firmly embedded into health and education and are based on a model whereby individuals receive their own budget to deploy as they wish in order to meet their own needs and achieve a desired set of outcomes. An important objective lying behind this is value for money – for the public sector through the provision of heath and social care in a more cost effective and targeted way, and for the beneficiary who essentially becomes a commissioner of provider services and who will in part seek those services which offer them best value for money. For providers of such services the delivery of social value through personalisation is therefore paramount; not only will they be seeking to establish their market presence and offer value for money to their customers, but in addition they will increasingly need to demonstrate their success in achieving outcomes for these customers and establishing a presence in their community or niche.

However it is not only the providers of the relevant services for which the need to demonstrate social value is important, but also the voluntary sector which often supports delivery of these services – many of those who are working with individuals in their homes and in the local and wider community are increasingly likely to be volunteers (Community Care, 2015). The capture and measurement of social value through the personalisation agenda is therefore likely to become increasingly relevant for third sector organisations and the umbrella organizations which support them. And of course the broader emphasis on value for money itself implies a broader assessment of the outcomes – both direct and indirect – through which that value is being delivered. This in turn emphasises the need for an outcomes based approach to benefit assessment and with it a

deeper understanding of stakeholder beneficiaries, both as private

commissioners of services, and as recipients of alternative forms and models of

social care.

Social Innovation

A further way of considering the distinctive role of independent and especially

smaller voluntary organisations is through the lens of innovation, and more

particularly in the present context, social innovation. This is distinguished from

technical and economic innovation in that it occurs at the level of social practice

(Howaldt and Schwarz, 2010). More specifically, Neumeir (2012) defines social

innovation as 'new forms of civic involvement, participation and democratisation

contributing to an empowerment of disadvantaged groups and leading to better

citizen involvement which may, in turn, lead to a satisfaction of hitherto

unsatisfied human needs' (op ct: 53).

A number of commentators are increasingly conceptualising voluntary action as

social innovation, including Seyfang and Haxeltine's (2012) concept of

community-led grassroots innovations and Kirwan et al's (2013) analysis of the

UK Lottery-Funded *Local Food* Programme which was considered a vehicle for

building community capacity through the development of what can very much be

construed as social value. This included the facilitation of community cohesion,

health and well being, educational enhancement and the integration of

disadvantaged groups into mainstream society and economy. Thus, social

innovation derived through voluntary action can be viewed as a vehicle for the

delivery of social value, or at least a lens through which to examine its facilitation and delivery.

But there are three additional points that make a consideration of social innovation relevant to social value in the context of the third sector. The first is that social innovation is not just about the facilitation of tangible improvements for society, but is about *change* – changes of attitudes, behaviour or perceptions that may result in new societal practices or forms of organisation, which in turn can help improve living conditions for stakeholders (Neumeier, 2012). The dimensions to this include the satisfaction of human needs that are not currently satisfied; increasing the levels of participation, especially amongst excluded groups; and the empowerment of those involved through increasing their socio-political capability and access to resources (Moulaert, 2005).

Second, there are intrinsic benefits to the processes of social innovation which themselves represent forms of social value, such as generating job opportunities, developing the skills base or helping to engender self-esteem and confidence amongst those involved (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Kirwan et al 2013). And through the so-called diffusion benefits of social innovation such as developing raised levels of awareness, empowerment and capacity building, communities have the potential to contribute to more profound paradigm change within society (Brunori et al, 2007; Seyfang and Smith, 2007).

What this short critique of the literature demonstrates is that a symbiotic relationship exists between social innovation and social value as delivered

through the voluntary sector. One the one hand, innovation creates social value - whether directly through programmes and projects, or indirectly through the processes of change through this delivery and its participation; and on the other hand the recognition of this value in turn necessitates behavioural change and the need to innovate. In the context of capturing and measuring social value, this relationship would firstly imply a need to firmly embed the processes for understanding and tracking change (for volunteers and wider stakeholder beneficiary communities alike) into the management systems and processes of an organization, and secondly to ensure that the lessons learned through the assessment of social value are routinely fed back into organisational planning to capitalise on the change being delivered through the innovation.

Conceptual Framework

The above assessment demonstrates clearly that the definition of social value as provided through the legislation fails to recognise the characteristics of smaller third sector organisations with regard to the delivery of social value, or their unique position in this delivery relative to the public and private sectors, the democratic system and indeed to the stakeholder and volunteer communities that these organisations serve and depend on. Perhaps most importantly, conventional definitions of social value appear to regard it as an end in itself, whether that is to deliver value for money, improve efficiencies or to provide more efficient delivery of public services. But for the third sector social value should arguably be considered an intrinsic element of not only what an organisation *delivers* and achieves for its stakeholders but also of how it *manages*
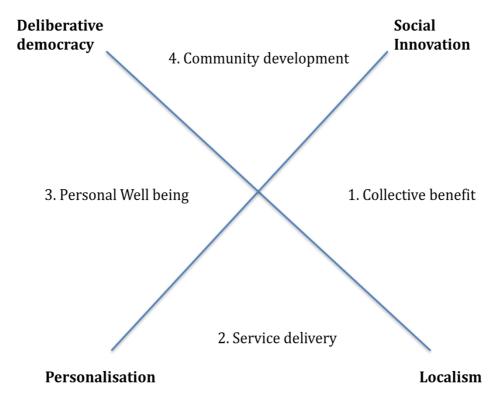
its activities and responds to changes in the political and socio-economic environment.

Taking all four of these agendas together provides a further layer to help conceptualise social value in a third sector context. Positioning the agendas around two axis as shown in Figure I reveals four domains of social value that are prominent for the third sector, and especially the smaller organisations within it, as summarized below.

1. Central to the practice of social innovation in the context of the localism agenda is the idea of **collective benefit** for stakeholders and communities through the satisfaction of human needs. Increasing the levels of community and voluntary participation, and the empowerment of those involved as a variety of local (and re-localised) social, economic and environmental problems can be more easily addressed as communities strive to contribute to paradigm change, for example in the area of community energy or local food.

2. More pragmatically - but nevertheless no less urgent with respect to the delivery of social value through the third sector - is the power of the localism agenda to not only drive but add value to **service delivery** through the third sector, necessitating the demonstration of the value generated through voluntary action and legitimising its status in this regard. And the personalization agenda is likely to play an increasingly prominent role in this as alternative models of health, transport and education provision are sought, especially as public spending cuts persist.

3. The domain of **personal well-being**, encapsulating health and wellbeing and other related forms of quality of life improvements also has great potential to be driven by third sector engagement with the personalisation agenda, not least because an environment of austerity is likely to increase the reliance on the voluntary sector for its effective and valued delivery. And to ensure recognition of this value alongside the increased efficiencies of public sector delivery will require the third sector to play an even more prominent role in deliberative democratic processes, particularly at a local level.

4. The processes of deliberative democracy and with it improved governance, accountability and links between the public, private and voluntary sectors should also further help to empower communities to take ownership of their own affairs, and to drive their own **community development**. Processes of social innovation, promoting community participation and democratisation and contributing to an empowerment of excluded and disadvantaged groups will underpin this with opportunities for social value creation, not only for beneficiary communities but also for the people and organizations involved.

Figure I: Conceptualising Social Value for the third sector

Deliberative democracy   **Social Innovation**

4. Community development

3. Personal Well being   1. Collective benefit

2. Service delivery

Personalisation   **Localism**

The four domains summarised above are by no means exhaustive, but are offered to be illustrative of the way that social value should be considered in the context of the third sector. Moreover, social value is intrinsically linked to the wider role of third sector organisations in society and the forces that drive and shape it.

The domains are also intrinsically embedded into the way that the third sector operates, and it therefore follows that the process of evidencing social value should also be embedded into the operational activities and management processes of organisations. Perhaps most importantly, social value should not be seen in isolation from such processes, or simply be seen as a lens through which

to evidence impact for specific reasons, such as for the purposes of securing grant funding. Instead it should become an integral part of how a voluntary organisation goes about its activities.

And finally, and encompassing both of these points, is the fact that all forms of stakeholder lie at the heart of both the understanding and evidencing of social value. In this sense stakeholders, including the beneficiaries, commissioners, local politicians and public officials amongst others, should drive both the delivery and assessment of social value. A solid future for the third sector arguably lies in making it inclusive and accessible, and voluntary organisations could usefully start by fostering a deep understanding of their wider stakeholder communities, and not just their direct beneficiaries.

The paper now moves on to operationalise this framework. It describes a programme of action research in which a social value assessment tool was developed and tested for use by smaller third sector organisations to both evidence their social value, and to augment and improve their planning and management activities to help ensure a more effective delivery. The following section provides an overview of the project before discussing the methodological considerations that were taken into account for developing the impact assessment tool.

The Gloucestershire Action Research Project

Genesis and Objectives

The Gloucestershire Action Research Project was one of five sister projects funded by the BIG Lottery under the two-year Proving Our Value (POV) programme[2], all involving various forms of action research to evidence the impact of the community and voluntary sector, and to develop tools to help social purpose organisations (SPOs) undertake their own impact assessments. The genesis of POV stemmed from Social Value Act introduced earlier in the paper.

The Act had also highlighted the importance of considering the full social and economic value of interventions. Whilst it was recognised that the voluntary sector had a lot to offer in the creation of social value, it was equally accepted by the project commissioners that this was a particularly difficult area of impact to evidence, not least because of the definitional and methodological issues previously described. Existing models for communicating social and economic value, such as Social Return on Investment (SROI), were deemed at the time of project inception to be too cumbersome, not robust enough, or to be misunderstood by commissioners. South West Forum's view, which reflected that of the wider sector in the UK, was that local Commissioners and the voluntary sector should be working together to develop appropriate methods of measuring the impact of public services, particularly in the light of the Social Value Act. The POV programme therefore sought to highlight the value of the

voluntary sector and to consider new approaches and measures to evidencing its impact.

A central element of POV was that it would involved the co-production (Durose et al 2011) of impact research and associated tools through partnerships between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and a range of Social Purpose Organisations (SPOs) covering the sub-sectors of health and well-being, employment, financial advice, infrastructure support, and in the case of the Gloucestershire project, community. The central methodology would necessarily be action research to facilitate this co-production and co-learning[3], and as a vehicle to building and strengthening the desired secotral links.

Action Research is commonly construed as a participatory, reflective process of progressive problem solving that is led by individuals working with others in teams to improve the way they address issues and solve problems. As Owen at al (2007) summarise, action research has been conceived by Eldin and Chisholm (1993) as a cyclical inquiry process that involves diagnosing a problematic situation, planning action steps and implementing and evaluating outcomes and by McCutcheon and Jurg (1990) as a systematic enquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry. Embedded within these definitions are four basic themes which resonate with social innovation, a cornerstone of Social Value as conceptualised earlier in the paper: empowerment of participants, collaboration through participation, acquisition of knowledge and social change.

This is akin to the recent debates around co-production in research, which aims to put principles of empowerment into practice, working with communities and offering them greater control over the research process, and providing opportunities to learn and reflect from their experience (Durose et al 2011). Advocates for co-production argue that research is enhanced through the inclusion of 'experiential expertise' (Collins and Evans 2002, which may highlight relevant questions otherwise neglected by experts (Fischer 2000). In this case the overarching aim was to enhance the effectiveness of the action research by making it better informed by the preferences and needs of participants through the co-production of an impact assessment tool that would be subsequently used by them and others in the sector. Through this the SPO partners would be contributing to improved outcomes and the attainment of achievable solutions (Ostrom 1996) whilst also benefiting from the expertise and knowledge of the HEI partner. Facilitated, assisted and guided by the researchers, the SPOs were thus able to play to a role in developing and testing their own tool designed to identify and understand their social and economic value through an iterative process of learning, understanding, implementation, interpretation and dissemination.

For the Gloucestershire project a partnership was assembled between the author's HEI and four SPOs from the county:

GL11 Community Project - A small rural community organsiation. providing a wide range of services to the local community including baby care and toddler sessions, educational and training opportunities, social events and youth groups.

Fair Shares - the UK´s first timebank[4] running eight time banks in Gloucestershire, and a countywide timebank supporting families and disabled children.

Gloucester City Centre Community Partnership (GCCCP) - An independent, voluntary resident-led organisation covering a deprived urban ward and carrying out a number of projects reflecting the views and lives of the local community.

In addition the project benefited greatly from the involvement of *Gloucestershire Association for Voluntary and Community Action (GAVCA),* an umbrellas organisation providing valuable advice and feedback to the research team at critical points throughout the project and helping to ensure that lessons were learned across the three casework projects.

The primary aim of the project was two-fold: to assess the social value of the three SPOs and where possible provide some impact estimates; and to develop a resource to enable the three SPOs and the wider voluntary and community sector to capture and interpret their social value on an on-going basis. Within this and as part of the co-production and learning inherent within the methodology, the project also sought to skill the three SPOs in the identification and valuation of their activities and to assist them in planning future activities in light of the identified benefits.

Action Research methods

Following an initial scoping phase whereby relevant projects and/or activities to follow in the study and the underpinning methodological approaches were identified, the research consisted of two main phases, as reported in this paper: Initial impact exercises which helped to shape the design and implementation of the developed tool; and sequential development and piloting of the tool in the three areas, in parallel providing further impact estimates. The various steps of the action research undertaken with the three case work groups, including details about the methods used and the nature and scale of stakeholder engagement across the two main phases of work is summarised in Table I.

Table I: Action Research steps, methods and stakeholder engagement across the three case work groups

Case work SPO	Research Phase	Action Research steps and methods
GL11	Initial impact exercises to inform design of the tool	The case work involved the researcher and the GL11 chief executive and her staff working closely together. Comprising ten visits to the GL11 offices, each of 2 to 4 hours, to interview staff, volunteers and clients and to study files and documentation relating to core and project specific activity.
		Six face-face semi-structured interviews with a range of third and public sector partner organisation's involved in the projects.
		Desk based research and scrutiny of file material relating to the projects –reports to the Lottery and other funders, records of extensive interviews with staff past and present and with a sample of the 'Deployment of volunteers' themselves.
		Scrutiny of qualitative monitoring and evaluation data collected from 31 'Employability course' participants, 75 members of the 'trying to remember' project, plus the exchange of working notes between researcher and chief executive.

	Sequential development and piloting of the tool	Implementation of Stage A of the SRA tool
		Six meetings between researcher and GL11 chief executive, each lasting about one-and-a-half hours. The newly appointed 'community-builder,' was involved in three of them.
		Drafting guidance note relating generally to the SROI technique was written by the researcher.
		Meetings devoted to the feasibility, practicality and usefulness of trying to define Cam-Unity's intended outputs and outcomes in a meaningful way (Stage A), and whether identified outcomes might possibly be encapsulated and measured using proxies and other indicators.
		Structured telephone interviews undertaken by SPO research support team with 20 'Cam-Unity' participants
		Focus group with 10 stakeholders involved in 'Cam-Unity' project to refine and validate impact evaluation findings.
Fair Shares	Initial impact exercises to inform design of the tool	Informal meetings and discussions with around 20 Fair Shares staff and members - mainly at coffee mornings.
		Participants observation at 2 Fair Shares staff meetings. Review and scrutiny of Fair Shares databases of activities and time bank members, newsletters and other communication materials.
		Semi-structured interviews with 12 Fair Shares members to explore time credit use and benefits

		of membership.
		Simultaneous completion of the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale (WEMWEBS) to gather mental health distance travelled data.
	Sequential development and piloting of the tool	Implementation of Stages A and B of the SRA tool
		Much of the data collection was undertaken by Fair Shares personnel, with minimal and necessary support and guidance provided by the researcher
		Compilation of an accompanying workbook and feedback for the tool, tailored to its application for a time bank.
		Fair Shares 'peer researcher' interviews carried out with 25 members to gather Stage A and B data, each lasting around 20 minutes. Completion of the accompanying workbook by each of the 25 members, taking around 3 hours.
		Complication of theory of change diagram (Stage A) and quantitative descriptive indicator results (Stage B) undertaken by the researcher, in communication with the fair Shares co-production team.

GCCCP	Initial impact exercises to inform design of the tool	1 Face-face semi structured interview and 2 follow up case work meetings with SPO lead and the organisation's treasurer to review and scope activities
		Desk based research by researcher to scope and map SPO activities and projects
		4 face-face semi structured interviews with stakeholders to inform the "Greyfriars' Theory of Change – 2 with members of the local Police Constabulary, 1 from a Crime prevention NGO and 1 project youth worker
		2 semi-structured case work meetings to scope and identify economic outputs and impacts for 'Project Orienteer'
		Desk-based and internal data base research by SPO lead (overseen by researcher) to gather quantitative spend and investment economic data
		Project Orienteer site users survey involving structured on site interviews with 60 general public users
		Follow up telephone interviews with 6 Project Orienteer site users to gather deadweight and attribution data

	Sequential development and piloting of the tool	Implementation of Stages A, B and C of the SRA tool
		Set up of 'Fielding and Platt' research team comprising 5 SPO personnel, including F&P project manager, chaired and overseen by researcher
		Storyboard workshop exercise facilitated by 2 members of the research team to inform the theory of change (Stage A) - involving 12 stakeholders associated with the implementation of and participation in the F&P project
		Completion of 58 structured surveys (37 online and 21 in hard copy) to gather indicator, deadweight and attribution data for Fielding and Platt SROI (Stage B). Informants including volunteers, previous employees of Fielding and Platt , relatives of previous employees and local community leaders & representatives.
		Assembly of financial proxies and construction of the Fielding and Platt SROI model (Stage C) undertaken by the researcher, in communication with the F&P research team to facilitate impact evaluation up-skilling.

Developing and piloting the Social Return Assessment (SRA) tool

An extensive scoping phase was initially undertaken over a 9-month period whereby all aspects of impact related information and activity (including data and management systems, potential and experienced outcomes and stakeholder types) was explored in detail. This revealed 3 clear messages to inform development of a workable impact assessment tool, as summarized in Box 1.

Box I: Salient messages from the scoping phase to inform development pf the impact assessment tool

1) Social rather than economic outcomes - The contribution of the three SPOs to wider societal and community development (and service delivery) was especially revealing, and whilst it did prove possible to identify and quantify some local economic impacts (through the contracting of activity for example), the real interest and relevance appeared to be around helping the SPOs to understand and articulate their contribution to generating benefits around issues such as health, well-being, social and human capital and general quality of life. And in recognising this, the third sector partners were more motivated to pursue impact assessments relating to these social (or socio-economic) outcomes.

2) The power of description - The initial experience across all three case work groups highlighted the fact that the process of documenting activities and of understanding qualitatively how those activities led to outcomes for the various stakeholders was not only less challenging than attempting some form of measurement, but was also just as useful to the organisations. In fact it became evident fairly early on that the *process* of undertaking an impact assessment was very useful in itself. The principal reason for this was that it helped them to understand what they were trying to achieve and how wider goals could be attained. Thus, although the research had initially set out to give the SPOs the tools to begin quantifying their impacts, the real value it seemed lay simply in documenting, understanding and articulating them.

3) The need for simplicity and flexibility - From the outset it became clear that the three SPO partners would need the researchers to remain fairly hands on throughout the process. And a clear set of skills and knowledge would need to be imparted along the way if at the end of the project local activists were to be in a position to attempt their own impact assessment. Skills, capacity and motivation to undertake a meaningful impact assessment were quickly recognised as being important attributes, as was the ability to keep clear succinct records about central elements of their activities, including, for example, volunteer time.

Putting all of this together and with the knowledge and ideas being gained from the regional meetings that members of the research team were attending, the seed was now being sown for what was to become the Social Return Assessment (SRA) tool. Based around the framework and principles of SROI, the tool would be designed to provide a greater degree of flexibility in terms of the elements undertaken, and would be more accessible in terms of language, approach and structure.

The basic premise of the tool is that it would allow for three levels of sophistication, and the choice about which level to choose would depend on the principal reasons for undertaking an impact assessment. The three levels were derived from the respective elements implicit to the SROI framework - exploring change, measuring change and valuing change - and reflected the conceptual principles (developed and discussed earlier in the paper) that undertaking no measurement or valuation at all would still be a legitimate and useful line to pursue. Given the evident usefulness of using an impact exercise to inform an organisation's planning, record keeping and managerial activities, the tool would also explicitly allow forward-looking assessments to be undertaken, as well as the evaluation of projects or activities that had already occurred.

The three 'stages' of work in the SRA tool are as follows, with the second and third stages adding further sophistication to stage A. In turn the three levels of sophistication may simply be termed levels 1, 2 and 3. And the choice of which level to pursue would depend on the requirements of the organisation and why they needed to undertake an impact assessment.

Stage A - Exploring (describing) Change	Level 1: comprises only Stage A
Stage B - Measuring Change	Level 2 comprises Stage A plus B
Stage C - Valuing Change	Level 3 comprises Stage A plus B plus C

The SRA tool was sequentially developed, tested and refined in a second phase of action research in which all three levels were individually piloted to derive some meaningful impact evidence for the organisations involved. In addition, one of the cases (GCCCP) would use the tool to forecast impacts and so would require examination of a project that was just about to start or had only recently got underway. In GL11 level 1 was pursued in an attempt to explore the outcomes of a project that had recently got off the ground, with level 2 piloted in Fairshares, this time in a different geographical area. In all cases some new SPO personnel were brought in to engage with and implement the tool, and such individuals were the primary drivers of that work.

Lessons learned and summary findings

The project revealed the nature of the impact of small voluntary and community organisations to be both varied and significant. Over the course of the research – which sequentially developed and tested methods for evidencing impact whilst revealing that

impact through 9 'live' projects across the 3 organisations – a range of outcomes were uncovered, especially around aspects such as health and well-being, social and personal capital and community cohesion. A summary of the main outcomes that were revealed through the research process is given in Table II below.

Table II: Summary of Outcomes from the Gloucestershire projects and SRA level implemented

SPO	Project / area	Revealed outcomes	SRA Level implemented
GL11	Development and deployment of volunteers	Increased readiness to take up paid employment Increased volunteering; personal capacity and confidence and improved service delivery locally	1
	Facilitation of employability courses	Improved confidence to apply for jobs and pursue education and training Increased employment (mainly part time)	1
	Try to Remember	Improvement in quality of life and sense of self-worth in dementia sufferers Improvement to personal care plans through the influence of poetry Personal development (broadly defined) of carers and volunteers	1
	Cam-Unity	('Projected rather than 'revealed' outcomes) Improved mental well being Increased interaction and support for vulnerable people Increased trust and belonging in the community Increased volunteering and sense of good neighbourliness	1/2

Fair Shares	Gloucestershire (Newent)	Improved mental health Reduced social isolation and increased support Increased sense of security, belonging and general well-being Improved skills and confidence through volunteering and interaction	2
	Gloucestershire (Gloucester)	Improved support networks and social circle Improved confidence and self-esteem Improved emotional well-being Improved sense of belonging in community Increased pool of community volunteers	2
GCCCP	Greyfriars Bowling Green	Improved mental health Improved confidence and self-esteem Increased trust and community cohesion Increase in youth volunteering and intergeneration activity Reduction in juvenile crime	1
	Project Orienteer	Improved physical health and weight loss Increased social interaction Local income generation through contracting Training in the sport of orienteering	2/3
	Fielding and Platt	Increased resilience and self esteem Increased supportive relationships Increased sense of trust and belonging Development of IT skills Increased emotional well being Increased competence, engagement and purpose Increased efficiency and funding sources for voluntary	3

| | | and community sector | |
| | | Increased capacity building and volunteering | 34 |

To highlight further findings from the study, and to illustrate the lessons learned from implementing the SRA tool, the remainder of this section focuses on GCCCP's *Fielding and Platt* project as it was the only one to fully implement all three levels of the tool, including monetisation of outcomes and production of a full SRA model akin to SROI.

Funded through the Heritage Lottery Fund and focusing on archival heritage of Fielding and Platt iron founders and engineers which operated in the city between 1866 and 1990 the project aimed to stimulate and share memories, develop learning resources, offer a range of volunteering opportunities and share archive resources for the wider local and global community of ex-employees and their families.

A theory of change exercise (Stage A) was undertaken using storyboard exercises administered by the project manager following a training session with the research team, and on-going mentoring through the process. Four workshops and selective interviews with stakeholders and beneficiaries were undertaken to map out potential and anticipated outcomes in a chain of events. The resulting outcomes map, summarised in Table III, produced a set of measurable outcomes cohering largely around various aspects of subjective well-being, including increased trust, resilience and a sense of purpose, as well as the development of IT skills and capacity building in the local community.

Table III: Fielding and Platt Theory of Change

Stakeholder group	Approx number	Interim Outcomes	Medium-longer term Outcomes
Previous employees of F&P Previous employees outside the UK	155 (no. former employees for which contact details held0 [1364 unique website visits recorded, but no counted in SROI calculations]	Increased sense of community and social circle Deepening of understanding and bonds with friends and family Re-establishment of contact with old friends and colleagues Development of IT skills through use of website and social media	Increased resilience and self esteem Increase in supportive relationships Increase in sense of trust and belonging
Relatives of F&P employees	25	Sense of pride in relatives Increased understanding of family history Deepening of understanding and bonds with friends and family Development of IT skills through use of website and social media	Legacy to leave future generations
Volunteers	37	Increased knowledge and skills Feelings of pride, reward and satisfaction from their involvement	Increased competence, engagement and purpose Increased resilience and self esteem

| | | Building of positive and productive relationships

Development of IT skills through use of website and social media | Supportive relationships

Increased sense of trust and belonging |
|---|---|---|---|
| VCS | 7

GCCCP

Gloucestershire Archives

Friends of Gloucestershire Archives

Gloucester Civic Trust

Gloucester Quays

Waterways Museum

Friends of Waterways Museum | Increased volunteer numbers

New and increased links between sector organisations

Increased awareness, appreciation and trust by the public | Increased vibrancy and efficiency of VCS

Increased public support for VCS |
Local Community	20 (Inc. relatives of Fielding and Platt families)		Increased volunteering in the community
Local Authority	-		Strengthened public profile - important but difficult to evidence
Local Economy	-		Increased visitor numbers to city – difficult to evidence and apportion

With no existing data or evidence identified to develop meaningful indicators that could be applied to the Fielding and Platt project, Stage B involved the design of a stakeholder survey to gather measurable data around the salient outcomes. An online survey (reproduced in hard copy for use at community events and project gatherings) was designed by the research team with the engagement of the project manager to facilitate learning and good practice, not only to aid effective survey implementation, but also to facilitate future evaluations by GCCCP.

In total 58 surveys were completed in full, with the project management team working hard to secure a credible level of engagement and response rate to the survey. Following conventional analytical techniques for SROI, likert scale (e.g. 1-5) data was converted into a proportional scale in order to provide a metric of change as shown in the second column of Table IV[5]. Data on the extent to which change in the outcomes could be attributed to the Fielding and Platt project (the issue of Attribution) was also collected via the survey while data on the extent to which this change would have happened anyway (Deadweight) was estimated by drawing on secondary data sources for equivalent change at the national level. For example, 10% of the change in well-being outcomes is estimated to have happened anyway through national drives towards health and well-being improvements. Survey data indicated that only 20% of change in well-being outcomes could be attributed to the Fielding and Platt project, a conservative figure perhaps but preferable to risking an over estimation of impact.

Table IV: Fielding and Platt SROI I – Summative Impact Map

Outcome	Change Score	Deadweight	Attribution	Financial Proxy	Proxy Value (£) / Unit	Drop-off rate (Duration)	Present Value (PV)*
Resilience and self-esteem	+1.5%	0.1	0.2	Cost of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to build psychological resilience and self esteem	1,240 p.p p.a	1	621
Supportive relationships	+4%	0.1	0.2	Annual value attributed to change to seeing friends and relatives most days from once or twice a week	15,500 p.p p.a	0.25	58,657
Trust and belonging	+3%	0.1	0.2	Annual value attributed to change to talking to neighbours most days from one or twice a week	15,666 p.p p.a	0.25	50,355
Emotional well-being	+16%	0.1	0.2	Value of mental health component on Quality of Life Adjusted year (NICE recommended expenditure of QALY is 30K)	10,560 p.p	1	7,346

Competence, engagement and purpose	+2%	0.1	0.2	Additional median annual wage for employed vs. self employed people	2940 p.p p.a	0.25	1,779
IT Skills	+46%	0.15	0.3	Cost of 3 day course in Microsoft Access at University of Reading	870 p.p	1	21,396
Funding sources	+42%	0.12	0.17	Average size of a charitable donation in the UK	372 p.a per household	0.25	1,044
Capacity building and volunteering	+37%	0.12	0.17	dfT estimation of business time savings. Based on Cost per year saved by organisation (based on hourly saving of 39.96, 4 hours per week)	7,353 per org	0.25	7,999
Total							149,147

* Discounted to 3.5% following UK HM Treasury standard

The final stage of the SRA - Stage C- was always expected to be the most problematic in terms of the knowledge, skills and experience required in order to source and select appropriate proxies for each of the outcomes in the model. In the event this task was undertaken by the research team, but again with an element of learning for the Fielding and Platt project manager.

Details relating to the selected proxies for all outcomes are given in columns 4 and 5 of Table III. The rationale for proxy selection drew upon previous SROIs (including Wright and Schifferes (2012) which was especially useful given its focus on well-being), the SROI network proxy database and on the knowledge and experience of the research team in undertaking previous project and programme evaluations using the SROI framework.

It was also necessary to establish the benefit period (the length of time that outcome change would be measured over) and 'drop off' (the speed at which attributable outcomes would decline to zero for those outcomes lasting more than one year). The majority of outcomes were assumed to last over a 5-year period, although a fairly steep decline of 25% per annum was assumed, based on qualitative data from the survey which implied that the time horizon over which outcomes could be attributable to the project would be fairly short lived.

In order to proceed to the final step and calculate a benefit-to-investment ratio for Fielding and Platt it was also necessary to gather some data around the investment made in the project and the numbers of stakeholders involved in or

impacted by it. This information, gathered from the Fielding and Platt project team, is summarised in Table V.

Table V: Investment in Fielding and Platt project

Stakeholder	Inputs description	Source / Calculation	Value (£)
Heritage Lottery Fund	Heritage lottery grant	Programme documentation / F&P tender document	£42,900
Volunteers	Estimated 1851 volunteer hours since project inception	Fielding and Platt management team based on the following rates: 531 hours of professional time @ £50 p.h; 203.5 hours of skilled time @ £21.43 p.h; 1116.5 hours of unskilled time @ 7.14 p.h	£38,900
Friends of Gloucestershire Archives	Additional match funding	Included as part of original application to HLF ('cash contribution')	£5000
Gloucester City Centre Community Partnership	Additional match funding	Included as part of original application to HLF ('cash contribution')	£500
Gloucestershire Archives	Goods and services in kind	Work station for project officer and volunteers Venue for training workshops for volunteers Loan of digital recording equipment	£1500 £5000 £400

Coots Cafe/Waterways Museum	Goods and services in kind	Venue for Memory Day event	£200
The Quays	Goods and services in kind	Venue for Christmas Social event	£200
The Quays	Additional contribution not put into the HLF bid	Graphic display panels (£5000) and free use of shop unit for 12 months [estimate £1000]	£6000
Gloucester City Council	Funding for 2 blue plaques commemorating the site of the Factory.		£300
Total Investment			**£100,900**

Having identified a total investment of £100,900 in Fielding and Platt it was possible to complete Stage 3 of the SRA tool and compute the ratio of 1.48:1, which provided GCCCP with a useful metric of how the Fielding and Platt project had affected change for its stakeholder community

Overall the pilot exercise undertaken at GCCCP involving the not in-substantial 'Fielding and Platt' project demonstrated the possibility and usefulness of pursuing all three stages of the SRA tool to produce an indicative benefit-investment ratio. Although there may be cases where provision of such a metric is likely to prove especially beneficial (for example in securing additional funding), the value and context provided by the qualitative stages of the tool also

proved invaluable. As in other cases, it helped to sharpen project objectives and to think through the monitoring and record keeping processes.

The piloting certainly benefited greatly from the dedication and motivation of the project management team to evidence impact of the Fielding Platt project, although the researchers were acutely aware throughout of the need to provide support and on-going advice as the various tasks were carried out, and the time constraints which meant that additional support was required during the final, and most complex, stage of the process. This in turn demonstrates the need for sufficient resources to be made available to smaller third sector organisations wishing to undertake their own impact assessments independent of a framework such as the one provided by this project.

Discussion, conclusions and recommendations

Given the focus on developing an accessible tool for the SPOs and the wider third sector to use in impact assessments, this section necessarily reflects primarily on the methodological aspects of developing the tool, and of its implementation to evidence social value. It does this in two ways. First, the experience of the action research described in this paper - and more especially that of the SPOs themselves - and the nature and extent of social value revealed, is briefly considered in terms of the four conceptual domains developed earlier in the paper: collective benefit, service delivery, personal well-being and community development. Some more general conclusions are then drawn around the evidencing of social value in the third sector, and brief recommendations are

made for third sector organisations, supporting umbrella organisations and the commissioning bodies who are likely to be a core audience for the social value assessments that ensue from implementation of the SRA tool.

All three organisations were already experiencing relatively high levels of community and voluntary participation at the time of the research, but the nature of outcomes revealed through the SRA process revealed the potential for **collective benefit** to be stimulated further. This was both as a direct result of projects which helped to generate community participation, and was shaped indirectly through the evidencing of social value. It also helped to make stakeholder and beneficiary communities more aware of the change being driven by its activities, and in turn drive interest and participation in future projects.

The action research to develop the SRA tool was undertaken during a period of public sector cuts as part of the UK Coalition government's (2010-15) austerity measures following the Global Financial Crisis. GCCCP was the larger of the three organisations, and operating in a deprived city centre ward where the local authority was actively looking to the third sector to help deliver services relating to community health, heritage management, recreation and youth facilities. As a result it was becoming increasingly aware of its role in **service delivery**, and of the need to evidence the wider value being generated as a result of its ongoing investment and commitment to serving the local community. A related implication is that the recognition and demonstration of social value becomes part of the service delivery itself, in turn embedding the role, status and regard for third sector organisations in the community.

The delivery of social outcomes relating to **personal well-being** was highlighted strongly by individuals in all three SPOs piloting and implementing impact activities throughout the action research. A core set of outcomes arising from their activities related to benefits such as increased resilience and self-esteem, improved emotional well-being, making beneficiaries feel more competent, engaged and purposeful, and helping to build cohesive and trusting communities. Ultimately the nature of an organisation's activities will of course determine the nature and extent of its impact but nevertheless the significance of well-being related impacts revealed through this project is particularly striking. And the findings reinforce those of similar studies which have shown the third sector sector to be fostering real change to people's quality of life and mental well-being (See for example Wright and Schifferes, 2012; Courtney, 2014**;** CAF, 2015; Mook, 2013; Farmer et al 2005), albeit in many cases indirectly and as an incidental benefit to the processes of volunteering and ensuing social interaction. Nevertheless, the present findings reinforce the notion that personal well-being should be an explicit domain in the conceptualisation of social value for the third sector, and that it represents a distinct element compared to wider definitions of social value.

A central finding of the action research is that the *process* of undertaking an impact assessment is just as important as the findings of that assessment. Across all three casework groups the process of identifying and mapping outcomes was shown to help SPOs understand and clarify what their objectives are, and how they can be best achieved. In this sense implementation of the SRA can itself be

regarded as an important aspect of **community development** in that it not only brings stakeholders and beneficiaries together with the common goal of identifying and articulating outcomes arising from community activities, but also assists the various stakeholders in communicating with and understanding each other. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the capacity of small SPOs to undertake comprehensive impact assessments is limited. While the project helped to skill the organisation's during the course of the project in an action research setting, the limited capacity for this work to continue at a similar rate beyond the life of the action research project needs to be acknowledged.

The need for more effective and targeted measurement of social value across voluntary organisations echoes the emerging consensus that SROI analyses can be improved immeasurably by a committed third sector applying a standardised framework to help them maximise their outcomes (Nicholls et al, 2009). The view of such commentators is that if a large network of charities routinely performed SROI analyses, the technical limitations would diminish because a body of data would be amassed and a standard methodology would develop naturally. The work described and tools developed in this paper speak to this call for a stronger evidence base to record the impacts of third sector organsations; for improved methods for obtaining more robust yet accessible financial proxies; and for more readily available advice for those organisations with limited capacity. Perhaps more importantly it provides an accessible toolkit to facilitate an impact assessment which isn't dependent upon, or constrained by, the need to measure or value outcomes in the face of limited capacity, or if it is not deemed appropriate or useful.

The developed SRA tool combines potential credibility to an external audience without the need for extensive investment in time and resources – often a major barrier to third sector organisations undertaking any form of impact assessment. And as Nicholls et al (2009) points out, SROI is of little use in the absence of a process framework by which it may be consistently applied by a large number of organisations. The conceptualisation of social value presented here, and the tool developed through the action research goes some way to informing such a framework. And as the challenge of measuring and demonstrating social value is likely to fall to the third sector (Harlock, 2014) such a framework is especially pertinent.

The findings also reveal less difference than might be expected in relation to how the nature of a third sector organisation affects its ability to assess impact, or how those measures should be put in place. Having 'many hands to the pump' obviously helps, and larger organisations (such as GCCCP in the present study) have slightly greater capacity to engage in more systematic process of record keeping and to undertake data collection in support of evaluation activities. But ultimately this capacity is often driven by the motivation and abilities of one or two key individuals.

The developed SRA tool emphasises the value of taking a flexible approach that accords with the reasons for undertaking an impact assessment, resources available and other context-specific factors. As such it serves well as an operational tool for the conceptual framework developed in this paper. Like many of its predecessors and its 'big sister', SROI, the tool inevitably suffers from

conceptual and practical difficulties and from a need to make some important assumptions around which benefit estimates are ultimately based. However, it is useful to note the potential for the SRA tool to overcome some of the recognised limitations of SROI in a third sector context. For example, Maier et al's (2015) argument that SROI may only contribute to symbolic legitimacy rather than communicating information of substance overlooks the potential for the SROI process to generate meaningful dialogue and learning that can benefit organisational management and project implementation. The demonstration of impact and social return can also legitimise organisations through helping them to secure funding from commissioning bodies. Indeed, the need for embedded and on-going monitoring and evaluation is increasingly being specified a condition of funded programmes whereby a certain percentage of a grant has to be committed to evaluating impact, embedding the learning from the associated monitoring into improving management and good practice as it is rolled out.

Recommendations for the sector

In recognition of these wider benefits organisations and evaluators may simply prefer to proceed no further than a largely qualitative exploration of a project's various inputs, outputs and outcomes and of the causal links that connect them – in short to develop a theory of change such as the one included in this paper. In this spirit, undertaking only Stage A of the SRA tool is perfectly legitimate in its own right. Selecting which of their projects or activities an organisation might pursue as 'case studies' might be determined by a number of factors, including data availability, the relative ease with which stakeholders and beneficiaries can

be engaged, and of course the ultimate aim of the impact exercise. This might be to help secure additional funding in a specific area, or it may simply be to evidence the wider contribution of the organisation to the community, economy or society.

It is certainly recommended that an impact assessment be considered as early as possible in the life of a project, organisation or tranche of activities, and a monitoring and evaluation framework put in place near the beginning to help provide a roadmap for impact assessment, and the tools and information required for it to be undertaken. Keeping succinct records and putting straightforward systems in place to record data in the early stages of project design will ultimately help to streamline the process and ease the burden on personnel undertaking the assessment.

However far users of the SRA tool may choose to go along the spectrum of possibilities, its application potentially has considerable value – not least for the SPO itself - beyond simply 'proving their value'. In accordance with fostering a better understanding of objectives, an outcomes-based assessment can help an organisation to argue its case for project funding, to better manage its projects (most notably by insisting on an outcomes-driven work programme), to develop the awareness and skills of its staff and volunteers, to better understand the reach and needs of its stakeholders, to collect and store useful and timely information, to effectively monitor and evaluate what it does, and to better and more convincingly communicate the value of its work to funders, partners and local communities. Improvements in the management of operational and data

management systems, and to organisational procedures and strategic development are central to all of the above. This includes more effective engagement with volunteer communities and improved targets for organisations through using an outcomes-based framework to articulate and achieve wider goals. In short, there is real organisational value to evidencing social value and the third sector could do a lot worse than recognising, and embracing, this.

With the respect to the nature of the impact evidence itself, the action research described in this paper has demonstrated that qualitative 'stories' of impact can be just as valuable as quantitative measures or metrics. Ensuring provision of appropriate assistance support and infrastructure to organisations contemplating an outcomes-focused analysis, for example through local or regional umbrella organisations, is likely to be highly beneficial to the sector.

Notes

[1] Under UK Government policy between 2010 and 2015 the Right to Bid gave community groups and voluntary organisations the right to bid for and purchase community buildings and facilities that were important to them. The Right to Challenge allowed them to run Local Authority services where they believed they could do so better.

[2] Funded by the BIG Lottery and commissioned by South West Forum, an umbrella organisation for the Community and Voluntary Sector serving the South West region of England.

[3] Co-learning also took place throughout the research programme between the five sister partnerships, each consisting of academics and representatives of the Community and Voluntary sector.

[4] Timebanks are community-based projects which meet everyday needs through the exchange of time, skills and opportunities.

[5] Scale data was transformed into an appropriate functional range of 0-1, whereby scaled variables were transformed in the form $(X-min[X]/(max[X] – min[X])$. This produced a transformation of the ordinal codes 1 through 5 (i.e. Strongly Disagree through Strongly Agree): 1=0; 2=0.25; 3=0.50; 4=0.75; 5=1.0.

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