

# INFRASTRUCTURE BODIES AND OUTCOMES POLICY

## Introduction

The fashion for dwelling on outcomes rather than outputs became evident about a decade ago, and seemed to be fuelled by a number of factors – a fashion for knowing “what works”, an obsession with targets, and with change. While there is a surface attractiveness to this idea – we would all like to do something that “really works” – most of it is promoted by people and agencies who have no real grasp of research method, and any sense of what it is actually possible to do.

## Outputs

Prior to this period, most work was measured in outputs. Basically, outputs measure activity – how many people attended; how many activities they did, and so forth. Some activity included some easily measurable things that might be regarded as outcomes – at a learning centre there might be exams passed, for example; but most did not. The reliance on outputs was not ill founded since it provides basic key information without using a disproportionate amount of resource on the collection:

- This provision is wanted and used
- This organisation is competent and able to monitor its own work
- If this provision wasn't here, the users would lose something of value to them

In good organisations this kind of output monitoring was often accompanied by the collecting of user feedback, which gave further information on what users felt about what they received.

## Outcomes

Unfortunately, this came to be seen as not enough. It was not good enough, for example, that young offenders use an education centre, and say that they feel it helpful; we also need to show that they pass exams; stay off crime; get jobs. More grandiose exponents of outcome theory have gone as far as to say that it should demonstrate that the crime rate is reduced!

These things, while it would be nice to know them, are very difficult to demonstrate. Over what period are we meant to track them? Systems to do so over any period of time would have to be very elaborate and resource intensive – far beyond the capability of a voluntary project (police and probation services find it hard with vastly greater resources). And how would one know a user hadn't offended? One could only know they hadn't been caught. Even if they get a job while at the project, how long are they meant to keep it?

Even if one could put the mighty effort into tracking these things, it would still be impossible to say that attendance at the project was responsible for these outcomes. In real life, a whole host of variables act on any given situation, and unless they have been controlled for (which in real life isn't possible), it's impossible to state with certainty what was responsible for any particular outcome.

The fashion has therefore driven the sector into a position of having to say it is doing something that can't actually be done. It is interesting (and predictable) that many funders who ask for outcomes, actually accept outputs in their place. This is partly because many of the officers administering the systems don't actually understand the difference, and partly because if they truly demanded real outcomes, then they would find it quite hard to give their money away.

### **Infrastructure Bodies**

These problems apply even more strongly to infrastructure bodies, since they are at one removed from where the front line work of the sector takes place.

Firstly, let us look at some of the demands coming from political levels, and manifested in the policies of some of its agencies. There exists the notion of "driving up the capacity of the sector", in which the infrastructure is supposed to play a key part. This might be acceptable as a vague ideal, but it certainly is not a demonstrable outcome, for a number of key reasons.

- You cannot demonstrate improvement in anything unless you have a baseline – proper information on what state it is in before you begin your programme of action. There is no baseline information on the capacity of the sector, so by definition improvement cannot be demonstrated.
- How would one measure anything across the whole sector, which contains thousands of organisations of vastly varying sizes, in a constant state of change. Of course you could use sampling techniques, but the whole enterprise would be immensely costly (as is witnessed by the new research initiatives like the Government's Third Sector Research Centre and Northern Rock's Research Initiative).
- What would one measure, and how would "capacity" be defined? There would be immense problems of arriving at a definition that was both sensible and measurable.
- Even if one could do all the above, it would still be impossible to demonstrate the infrastructures' contribution to the change, because there are so many variables in play. It would be impossible to demonstrate that their input had been the cause of change, rather than the many other variables that could be affecting the situation – flows of money, government policy, funders behaviour, social conditions to give just a few.

### **Local Infrastructure**

Finally, let us look at how these demands might impact on a standard service of a CVS, - working with groups on good governance. Under the old systems, this was usually measured by use of the service (which demonstrates that it is needed) and client satisfaction (people are happy with the service they get). But in an outcomes framework, what are we meant to demonstrate? That the group performed better because of this advice? Impossible, for much the same reasons as before:

- We have no proper baseline.

- We have no capacity to follow up the hundreds of groups that consult us and see how they perform.
- It is unclear what we would be looking for even if we could. The service to their users? That was not what we advised on, so that would seem odd. Whether their policies are improved? We could (just) look at whether the bits of paper were there, but hardly whether they are using them well. Whether they hold better committee meetings and AGMs? Hardly worth the effort.
- Even if the group did “improve”, there would be no way we could prove it was anything to do with us – the multiple variable problem again. Anything could happen to the group – funding is lost or gained; a key person leaves or arrives, - and these are much more likely to affect performance than anything we do.

All of the above is about the impossibility of demonstrating effect on groups we have worked with individually. But it needs to be remembered that a considerable amount of CVS work – newsletters, information sheets and so forth – goes out in a way that means we don't even know who used it, so it is manifestly impossible to know what effect it had. Of course we can do user surveys, but again this will only tell us whether they were used, and whether clients were happy with them, not what the “outcomes” were. Yet these are key, and time consuming, parts of CVS work.

Asking local infrastructure to demonstrate its effects on front line work is to put it in an impossible situation, and my contention is that we do ourselves no favours by pretending we can go along with it. I believe that it is a perfectly respectable position to say that if a service is continually used to capacity; that its users express satisfaction with it, and that it can demonstrate the quality of service, then it is clearly needed.

Fundamentally, I believe in two very currently unfashionable positions. Firstly, that it is sometimes self evident that it is better if a service exists than that it doesn't. For example, in a location with few facilities it is simply self evident that it is better if there is a place for young people to gather together and do things, than if there isn't. The only proof you need is that young people attend, and that they like it. It is self evident that it is better for there to be a day centre for older people to go to than that there isn't. And it is better if there is an infrastructure agency for groups to rely on than that there isn't.

Secondly, not all activity has to be aimed at change. Providing activities that aim only to support, and help people feel better about their lives is perfectly respectable. Not everything has to create social or individual change – social activity and making people happier are ends in themselves.

None of the above should be taken to imply that voluntary organisations shouldn't demonstrate their worth in all ways that are appropriate, and I have indicated what some of them are. But we should fiercely resist being asked to demonstrate things that are beyond our resources to do; or simply not doable, or not our purpose anyhow. When we do not resist, we are asking to be judged on inappropriate criteria by people who have little grasp of what they are asking for. We do ourselves, and our users, no favours by doing this.

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