

## Dear Reader

It's a good feeling when you learn that things are working out and that the efforts of ARVAC's volunteers are not in vain.

You will know from my previous editorials that I don't shy away from telling you when times are difficult and from giving you the correct figures, even if they don't meet self imposed targets.

But I can say, it's a good feeling to know that numbers of subscribers to the website and members of ARVAC are steadily going up.

It's a good feeling to collaborate with our existing and new organisational and individual supporters such as our colleagues at the Salvation Army and at Nottingham University.

It's a good feeling that we have interesting future events lined up and plans for more publications.

It's a good feeling to see new plans emerging for a self confident research programme into community research.

This is a special issue of the bulletin concentrating on the contributions at last month's ARVAC Annual Lecture. It's a good feeling to be able to write that participants enjoyed being there. If you couldn't be there you can listen again on our website or, of course, read it all here. As always my sincere thanks go to all contributors.

Don't get me wrong. I trust that this is not an overconfident, self congratulating piece of hubris. This is a sigh of relief after much hard work. It is respite from the worry about the next edition of the bulletin and for me just a cautious smile in difficult times.

The work isn't over and the road ahead is anything but easy, yet, it is a good feeling to be able to believe that together we can make a difference, that together we can make an impact, whichever way you want to measure it. Maybe, just maybe, we should sometimes measure it by the good feeling it leaves within us.

**Jurgen Grotz** (editor)

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## Valuing Values

### Sukhvinder Kaur-Stubbs

Especially in such impecunious times, there is a clear and justified obligation to demonstrate impact. For a charity dependent on grants and voluntary funding, accountability and efficiency are paramount. Funders expect reassurance that each pound is well spent. Stakeholders want to be confident that public benefit is delivered. Staff motivation is strengthened by knowing they are making a difference. The goodwill of the public is enhanced by palpable signs of success. Despite this imperative for proving positive effect, the measures at hand remain archaic and incongruous. Over-emphasis on counting and responding to short time horizons, undervalues the full potential of the voluntary organisations. It risks mission drift and skews activity away from sustainable development. Voluntary and community sectors have become prey to the same sort of commoditisation so prevalent in the public and private sectors. Our beneficiaries are treated as consumers and the value of what we do is determined by the markets within which we operate. Within each market, what gets counted, gets valued.

It's not even that counting is easy. Charities are working extremely hard to establish more progressive measures of impact. Among the best is St Giles, for example, which worked with Pro Bono Economics to compare re-offending rates among their clients with a group of ex-

offenders not supported by the charity. They reported that for every £1 invested in the service, UK taxpayers potentially saved £10. These are highly compelling results and a strong indicator that the techniques deployed by St Giles, are far more effective than those of other providers. But in order to demonstrate impact, charities like St Giles, have had to adapt to 'the market'.

In 'the market', transactions replace relationships in people's dealings with one another. Among what is distinctive and most desirable about the voluntary sector, is the relationship building. Joining up public services at local level and strengthening social bonds contribute to equality and cohesion. However, market forces mitigate against such solidarity and it is the attrition of these ties, that disrupt and disable weaker communities and expose vulnerabilities. Arguably and in extremis, charities are often patching up the failures of the market economy rather than adding value per se. A more reliable measure of the impact of a charity could be its success in increasing the self-determination of its beneficiaries and their wider communities. This would be preventive action, shoring up the resistance of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable to the selective and sometimes Darwinian, effects of the market.

Markets also force ventures to compete rather than co-operate and shield rather than share their insights. Such action runs counter to the values of the voluntary sector and its commitment to public benefit. Over the last 50 years, much of the improvements in equality, environment and justice, have come from networks and coalitions where voluntary organisations have pooled their knowledge and resources. Personalisation and the breakdown of institutionalised care, for example, have been pioneered by the disability movement; 'nothing about us- without us'. Increasingly, public and private sector bodies are realising that service improvement and quality assurance can come from user involvement and by capturing and learning from the experiences of the public. It behoves the voluntary sector to adopt measures that promote innovation and service improvement rather than competitive advantage.

When it comes to assessing bangs for the buck, speed is of the essence. Most contracts are reviewed annually. Longer term commitments are driven by price savings rather than improvements in results. For many years, I was CEO of the Barrow Cadbury Trust and funded community groups working with some of the most vulnerable people. WAITS (Women Acting in Today's Society), based in Birmingham supported victims of domestic violence. The Barrow Cadbury Trust provided core funding for over a decade. We provided a series of three –five year grants with six monthly reports. The purpose of the monitoring was to understand progress and challenges,

not to assess impact. But impact has definitely been achieved. Many of the clients are now advocates and champions for other women. WAITS itself has expanded into a diverse organisation supporting women on a variety of issues. It has developed a strong national and international platform so that the voices of women can be heard. Changing lives and life chances is a long-term project.

My plea to the voluntary and community sectors is to avoid succumbing to market control in demonstrating impact. Our beneficiaries are not commodities but individuals who respond to due care and attention. Our role is not to treat members of the community as consumers, but enable them to become confident citizens, more engaged and self-determined. In demonstrating impact, we should not necessarily become better at counting what we do, but valuing what we do. It is what is valued that should get measured.

**Sukhvinder Kaur-Stubbs is Chair of Volunteering England. Previously, she was CEO of the Barrow Cadbury Trust and before that CEO of the Runnymede Trust.**

**Her hash tag:  
@Sukhvinder2011.**

## Valuing evaluation

### Emma Stone

I work for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation – where we place a high value on *evidence* (social research, practice experience, and people’s direct experiences). Inevitably, this shapes my perspective on ‘impact measurement’. Whilst there are many reasons to evaluate practice or initiatives (e.g. satisfying current funders, satisfying future funders, accountability beyond funders to beneficiaries and the wider population, etc...), the ones that interest me most are about evaluating in order to learn:

- To learn so as to improve one’s own effectiveness
- To learn so as to improve the effectiveness of others
- To be part of building a *bigger evidence base* that can be used to inspire or advocate for wider changes – whether in policy or practice, understanding or behaviours.

I want to give an example from recent JRF work on education and poverty. For me, this underlines the value of evaluating interventions and initiatives, and the importance of doing evaluations well.

Over several years, JRF has funded research on the gap in educational attainment between rich and poor children. By 2007, the findings from eight projects indicated that low income is a strong predictor of low educational performance but that just 14% of variation in performance at school was accounted for by school quality (Hirsch 2007). In other words – if you want to raise achievement, you need to look at the range of children’s experiences inside and outside school. The research pointed to the significance of different attitudes to education.

So we delved further – and commissioned research into the importance of attitudes

and behaviour for poorer children’s educational attainment (Goodman and Gregg 2010). Two of the factors that appeared to explain the widening gap (during primary school) between children from poorer and richer backgrounds were: parental aspirations for higher education and how far parents and children believed their own actions can affect their lives .

So we delved further still (Carter-Wall and Whitfield 2012) – and, knowing that there are vast numbers of interventions that aim to improve educational attainment of children from poorer backgrounds – we commissioned a study to evaluate evaluations (Todd et al 2012). The question was: “What are effective ways of intervening in aspirations and attitudes of children and parents in order to impact on educational outcomes to the benefit of socio-economically disadvantaged children?” To answer this, the team mined the evidence base to select the best evaluations of interventions which aimed (at least in part) to improve educational attainment by raising aspirations. This work *relied* on the existence and quality of evaluations.

The bad news is that – whilst several hundred interventions reports were accessed, not all interventions had been evaluated, or evaluated well. So the review created three categories: ‘effective interventions’ (where there were robust evaluations that provided convincing evidence of impact), ‘promising interventions’ (where evaluation methodologies were lacking in some area of methodological quality but there was evidence of impact); and ‘interventions which had no evidence’.

The good news is that this review, combined with other JRF research investigating whether the links between attitudes and aspirations and attainment are causal (Gorard et al 2012), have raised important questions about the efficacy of investing in *raising aspirations* – despite this being regarded as something of a ‘truth’ in educational policy and practice. In fact the researchers found that aspirations are high; that changing three attitudes (aspirations, locus of control, and valuing school) did not impact on educational attainment; and that what matters is not to raise aspirations but to keep aspirations on track (e.g. through providing practical support to parents).

This is evidence that – in such a harsh fiscal climate – has been highly valued by practitioners and policy makers. Positively, it has already helped to direct more resources into things that *do* make a difference, rather than things that were *assumed* make a difference.

That’s a very good reason to value evaluation.

Whilst being a firm advocate for evaluation, I also know how difficult it can be to do well. Some of this is about tools and methodologies - especially difficult where the things we want to learn about are messy and complex and personal, and where you’d need a much longer time-frame to get a true understanding of impact and influence. Some of it is also about the tricky social relations of research production: the divergent (and sometimes deeply conflicting) cultures and agendas of those of us involved in the act and arts of evaluation. Some very different realities govern how players and partners behave when we start to evaluate and look for evidence of impact. Even with sufficient resources, skills and tools in place, evaluations can run aground especially at analysis and

writing-up stages when the latent agendas of those involved, including funders, come to the fore. Such tensions may be exacerbated in the current context – as there is more talk of ‘impact’, more demand from funders to assess impact, and more competition for scarce resources.

At JRF, we have experienced these tensions when we have evaluated our own practice (the close connection between the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust two organisations with a shared purpose and strategic plan). We have found it too where we have co-funded practice demonstration and evaluation with others: our commitment to making evidence public and our belief that people can learn as much (if not more) from other people’s mistakes as from their successes can (understandably) bring us into conflict with partners, and even conflict with ourselves. (As a funder, its only through starting to evaluate your own impact that you realise just how hard it is to be ‘evaluated’ rather than ‘evaluator’).

Notwithstanding the pitfalls and pains, I hold onto my belief in the value of evaluation – where it is meaningful, useful, proportionate, and focused on *learning*. Evaluation is an essential part of building an evidence-base that can help inspire change.

### **Emma Stone is director of Policy and Research, Joseph Rowntree Foundation**

Follow her on Twitter: @jrfemma

All the reports Emma refers to can be found on <http://www.jrf.org.uk> in the publications section.

## What counts as impact?

Allan Cochrane

The notion of impact is part of a new common sense about public policy (a bit like evidence based policy-making used to be). And, of course, it is hard to disagree with - who wants to do things that have no impact? Yet, it may be worth stepping back before just accepting it.

From the perspective of the impact agenda, what counts is what can be counted. And it is argued that focusing on measurable impact helps to make sure that things get done. It is understood to be a challenge to fuzzy thinking, to the self-satisfied claims of those who take for granted what they are doing is a good thing – a challenge to professionals and do-gooders to show they are doing good in ways that others can see.

But – whatever its strengths – some of the problems with uncritically adopting this approach are increasingly apparent. The targets or measures become what we work to, rather than seeking to deal with the issues themselves, and obvious examples can be found in various target based regimes – from hospital waiting lists to school league tables.

More important, perhaps, it assumes that everything can be counted, which makes it difficult to take account of the various unspoken/taken for granted acts of conviviality or caring that don't appear very obviously in contracts of lists of tasks that can be ticked off. In some areas (such as adult social care) what is done in the margins is more important than the task itself.

To take just one example from my own area: universities up and down the country are preparing for the introduction of the Research Excellence Framework to determine distribution of funds to support research. Included in the criteria is 20% for 'impact'. The argument is clear – we need to think much harder about what and who research is for, beyond the academy. In that sense it sets out to give academic research a wider

social (and political) significance.

But however persuasive the argument that university based research has (or should have) some sort of wider impact, that leaves open the question of how to recognise 'impact'. According to the Higher Education Funding Council:

'Impact **includes**, but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to:

- the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding
- of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals' and can be
- 'in any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally' and finally...
- 'Impact **includes** the reduction or prevention of harm, risk, cost or other negative effects'

So, whatever other conclusions can be drawn from this list, impact is understood to be a one way process - of us (researchers) on them (society).

And the challenge of how to measure it remains. Clearly this cannot be a straightforward process since so much is (potentially) there to be captured under the heading of 'impact'. In practice the approach taken is built around case studies, one for each ten members of research active staff. In other words, impact is to be understood through a process of story-telling, although, of course, only some stories will be heard and only some stories told, namely those that fit with the taken for granted assumptions about what impacts are legitimate.

In a way this exercise seems more about getting behaviour change among academic researchers than it is about the measurement process itself. If that is one story of 'impact', let me draw on another from my own experience. Many years ago I worked for a Community Development Project in Birmingham, which was specifically intended to be based around action-research. We were supposed to come up with and test (small scale) initiatives as we went, looking for ways in which they might be scaled up. Of course, it didn't quite work for a couple of reasons: the first and most important is that the 'community' was not simply an inert mass waiting to be galvanised into action, but was actually a complex and changing set of social networks whose members were already looking for ways of reshaping the place within which they lived. And, of course, when we succeeded in working with members of the community to generate local action of one sort or another, that was often not what was wanted by those who were funding us (as unexpected demands were made of state and other agencies). Second, as we (forcefully) pointed out, there were rather bigger structural factors in play as East Birmingham's local economy was remade in the context of deindustrialisation.

So, how should our impact have been measured? We could certainly point to some small achievements (for example, relating to the assistance the project gave to a significant group of people whose citizenship and residence rights were dramatically affected in the mid 1970s by the forced departure of Pakistan from the Commonwealth...but I am not sure that was ever what was intended by the Home Office). But a bigger one might relate to ways of thinking differently (but again I am not sure that was quite what the Home Office wanted!). And maybe in retrospect we missed the point, too (does that mean we failed?).

So far, then, I have been emphasising some of the dangers of counting for its own

sake – or for the sake of imposing new controls on those whose impact is being measured. But there is, equally, a danger of dismissing the value of some ways of measuring, some ways of accounting for social realities, for example in identifying division or forms of inequality. Recently Occupy - one of the most impressive grassroots political movements – has drawn on a very simple figure around which to mobilise, contrasting the interests of the wealthiest 1% with those of the remaining 99%. And the campaign for the London Living Wage (associated with London Citizens) has quite explicitly used a range of statistics, both to highlight the need to move beyond the minimum wage and to measure success, as employers have been persuaded to accept it as a basis for negotiation.

So, rather than dismissing the value of looking for ways to measure impact, perhaps the focus should be on who is measuring and for what, as well as on how the measurement is done. We tend to assume that counting is done of us by others, and that is often how it works. But counting should be an active process in which we are also engaged in defining what is to be counted (and what is to count as impact) and how. In this context, drawing on my own not so successful past, there is a strong case for developing what has been called participatory action research – working in and through voluntary and community groups

Of course, all this basically involves walking a tightrope. Most of us, most of the time are dependent on funding from others. That means we end up having to play by their rules a lot of the time, being counted by them. But we need to be sure that we can account for ourselves, too – and not focus on our impact on others but also looking for ways of working with others to achieve positive change.

**Allan Cochrane is Professor of Urban Studies at the Open University.**

## Measuring the pig doesn't make it fatter

### Sioned Churchill

Of course everyone would like to know if their work has made a difference, who wouldn't? But therein lies the challenge— of capturing, measuring, assessing and analysing data in the most appropriate way in order to make a judgment about your effectiveness. The Trust for London, alongside a number of other funders, has played a part by investing resources, training and support so that the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) can become more skilled in evaluation and learning, with a particular emphasis on the latter.

Over the past 10 years much progress was made within sector, particularly in assessing outcomes. Whilst there continues to be some frustrations about the quality of reporting, many organisations have benefited from being much clearer about their aims and objectives, and identifying the difference they want to make. However, more recently there has been a shift in the language used by some funders and commissioners, from *outcomes* to *impact* without much explicit discussion about how these differ, and with a greater emphasis on the *measurement* of impact.

There is a danger that with this greater emphasis on impact measurement, it can mask the real quality of the work being undertaken and the learning that emerges from that work. This is illustrated by a poor farmer who said "*Measuring the pig doesn't make it fatter*". The farmer had been in receipt of international development funds, and who, along with other farmers, was experiencing 'evaluation fatigue'. The farmers were more interested in what works and in what context so that they could learn and implement these changes for themselves. The key was the *learning* and a recognition that impact measurement was only one part of the picture.

In the past, it has been generally recognised that measuring or assessing impact (broader/ longer-term change) is particularly difficult, especially when funding tends to be awarded in three-year cycles with little resources for independent evaluation within or beyond this timescale. There is therefore a need to guard against becoming too technical and mechanistic when talking about impact measurement,

without also giving adequate recognition to the nuanced nature of the work being undertaken (often regarded as its strength) and resourcing the sector to be better skilled at capturing both qualitative and quantitative data, if the evidence gathered is to be really meaningful for the organisation itself as well as others.

This new emphasis on impact and specifically impact measurement may have positive motivations behind them, but in the current climate of funding cuts and a shift to new contract arrangements such as payment by results, it is not surprising that the sector may feel threatened and interpret these shifts negatively. There seems to be a greater spotlight on how the voluntary and community sector can demonstrate its effectiveness which is disproportionate to other sectors including both private and public.

Furthermore, there needs to be much more clarity amongst funders, commissioners and decision-makers in particular, about the purpose of assessing impact. Is it to measure the performance of the organisation? For accountability or learning? To contribute to an evidence-base? To assess value for money? It may be a mix of these but it is often not clear to either party and this can give rise to confusion and mixed expectations. If the funded work is really innovative or likely to make an interesting contribution to our knowledge about an issue, shouldn't the funders be partners in this? This would mean investing appropriate resources for the evaluation of that work and negotiating how best to disseminate and share the findings (including where things have not gone so well).

It is also crucial that the value of learning is not sidelined within this debate, and if anything, there needs to a renewed emphasis on how best to support organisations to capture and use their learning, as well as their skills in assessing their impact, so that evaluation becomes a more meaningful and useful exercise for all concerned.

**Sioned Churchill is Director of Special Initiatives and Evaluation at the Trust for London**



## 'living community'

### Jinimi Cricket

Some say,

*"You can't think your way into a new way of living...you have to live your way into a new way of thinking."*

It probably has some deep philosophical meaning. I wouldn't know. I am just a cricket.

But I think I know that a community of people with a common interest cannot just be a good idea. Even if it is the world's best idea but it stays just on paper it remains lifeless.

Even if the good idea is supported with some resources, some money even, but nobody lives the idea it will remain lifeless, animated only by external energy.

A community only really comes to life when its members act. When they live their ideas.

ARVAC is such a community. I will tell you Sarah's example below.

Think about it. What would you like to do, how will you act?

**Jinimi Cricket is the nom du plume of a member of ARVAC.**

*Sarah Menzies is a development worker with the Evelyn Oldfield Unit (EOU) with over 10 years experience of research. She has been involved with ARVAC for over two years. She has previously attended Board meetings and presented at the 2011 conference with a refugee community organisation.*

*She is now in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of running a research programme for refugees and migrants. In the last year, this was offered as an accredited module, through the Open College Network (in collaboration with the Africa Educational Trust- AET). This course is funded by Trust for London and the Big Lottery for the EOU and from the City Bridge Trust for the AET.*

*ARVAC has been useful to the course in a number of ways. Firstly, a tutor from the ARVAC – Islington Voluntary Action research programme shared key learning with her. Secondly, an ARVAC board member, Fleur Bragaglia, presented at one of the sessions for the 2011-2012 programme. This was useful for the students but also was an excellent example of collaboration. The third and most significant aspects of ARVAC on the course was encouraging the students to refer to and use the ARVAC 'Getting Started.' Students responded very positively to his.*

*With this learning and sharing, Sarah managed to support 30 refugee and migrant adult students to complete a research project and present a report. This is now being followed up by an accredited advocacy module where the findings of the report will be turned into an advocacy message and the students encouraged to act on their learning.*

*Topics are diverse and include examining second generation South Sudanese conceptualisation of their identity, social enterprise as a tool for regeneration of positive African men, attitudes to HIV amongst religious leaders and an examination of mental health as a taboo amongst Eritrean community (and many other excellent area of research – too numerous to list here).*

*We hope that ARVAC can play another significant role in the next community research course due to start in October 2012.*

*For further information about EOU see [www.evelynoldfield.co.uk](http://www.evelynoldfield.co.uk). You can contact Sarah through the Plaza on ARVAC's website.*

**This year the**

**ARVAC Annual Conference and AGM**

**will be in Nottingham,**

**Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> November.**

**Like every year we are looking for examples of community research.**

**Please contact us through the website if you want to contribute and showcase your activities.**



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promoting effective community action  
through research

#### About ARVAC

ARVAC (The Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector) was established in 1978. It is a membership organisation and acts as a resource for people interested in research in or on community organisations.

We believe that voluntary and community organisations play a vital role in creating and sustaining healthy communities, and that research plays an essential role in increasing the effectiveness of those organisations involved in voluntary and community action.

#### We want to hear from you:

Please send us:

- News items
- Details of new publications, resources or websites
- Information about research in progress
- Meetings or events you would like us to publicise
- Comments or opinion pieces you would like to share with other ARVAC members

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