Demonstrating Impact:
Current Practice Amongst Social Purpose Organisations in the Republic of Ireland

THE WHEEL
Support and Representation for Community & Voluntary Organisations

Demonstrating Impact

Current Practice Amongst Social Purpose Organisations in the Republic of Ireland

A report prepared for The Wheel

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December 2011

Preface

The Wheel is very pleased to publish this report which presents a clear picture of current practice in community and voluntary organisations in maximizing effectiveness and demonstrating the impact of their work.

We believe that the ability of organisations to get to grips with the concepts and tools that allow them to demonstrate their impact will be of critical importance to them in the coming years. We are committed to contributing to the thinking that will be needed in the sector to enable this to happen; to helping organisations make that transition, and to share what we learn along the way.

In that spirit, this publication is an early milestone point in a programme of work we embarked on during 2011, which focuses on how organisations can maximize their effectiveness and demonstrate their impact. It forms one of a series of publications and supports that are being rolled out in 2012 and beyond.

In producing this report, we were delighted to work with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in the UK as well as partner organisations in the UK (the National Council for Voluntary Organisations) and Portugal (Entrajuda) to assess the state of impact measurement amongst social purpose organisations in each of the three countries. This report is the result of the Irish element of that international project, which came to a conclusion in Spring 2012.

I would like to thank the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation not only for the funding which made this work possible, but also for the leadership and direction that they have shown as this international project developed. Their interest in this topic is very encouraging because, as the report show, we have quite a journey ahead of us in the sector in Ireland, if we are to meaningfully demonstrate our impact to ourselves, our beneficiaries and our funders.

Deirdre Garvey
Chief Executive Officer, The Wheel

About the report author

Sandra Velthuis is an independent consultant, providing a range of information and support services to clients in the not-for-profit sector. Originally from the Netherlands, she has also lived in England, Wales, France, Australia, the USA and, since 1997, Ireland. She has some 25 years of experience in the not-for-profit sector, as a paid employee, director, trustee, on-the-ground volunteer and consultant with a wide variety of organisations. She has a particular interest in evaluation and the measurement of outcomes, impacts and social value. She is currently working towards Social Return On Investment (SROI) Accredited Practitioner status.
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Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the contribution made by a large number of organisations and individuals, without whose input this research would not have been possible.

Firstly, I wish to thank sincerely the following experts who made time in their very busy schedules to be interviewed by me:

- **John Bamber**, Principal Fellow, Community Development, Centre for Effective Services
- **Seamus Carlin**, Business Development Manager, Gauge
- **Sheila Cahill**, Owner, Sheila Cahill Consulting
- **Ivan Cooper**, Director of Advocacy, The Wheel
- **Seán Coughlan**, Chief Executive, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland
- **Fiona Descoteaux**, Economic Development Manager, Ballymun Whitehall Area Partnership
- **Brian Dillon**, Founder Director and Senior Researcher, Nexus Research
- **Allen Dunne**, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, Disability Federation of Ireland
- **John Healy**, Director of Impact Assessment and Global Learning, The Atlantic Philanthropies
- **Paul O'Sullivan**, Chief Executive Officer, Clann Credo: The Social Investment Fund
- **Diane Richmond**, Assistant Chief Executive Officer, Partas
- **Emma Rorke**, Local Community Development Programme Development Officer, Pobal
- **Alix Tiernan**, Monitoring and Evaluation Programme Officer, Christian Aid.

These individuals provided me with a range of useful signposts, for which I am also very thankful:

- **Caroline Fahey**, Social Policy Research Officer, Society of Saint Vincent de Paul
- **Peter MacCafferty**, Managing Director, Cúnamh ICT
- **Sheila Nordon**, Executive Director, Irish Charities Tax Reform Group
- **Conor Ryan**, Research and Evaluation Officer, Blanchardstown Area Partnership
- **Gladys Swanton**, Training Manager, Community Evaluation Northern Ireland
- **Hans Zomer**, Director, Dóchas.

I am grateful too to **Joy Dobbs**, Research Consultant with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, and **Karen Frisch**, Head of Capacity Building at Entrajuda, with whom I clarified the approach they were taking to their research in England and Portugal respectively.

Finally, I am very appreciative of **The Wheel** for contracting me to undertake a fascinating piece of work and I laud the **Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation** for investing in this much-needed research.

Sandra Velthuis
Whitebarn Consulting

Contents

1   Introduction

1.1   It has never been more important for social purpose organisations to focus their limited resources on maximising positive social change. The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is funding a scoping exercise in three countries (England, Portugal and Ireland) to assess the extent to which voluntary not-for-profits and social enterprises are measuring the impact that they are having and what the enablers and barriers to this are [1].

1.2   This brief report provides a snapshot of the situation in Ireland in November 2011. It does not claim to be definitive. Although the term 'impact measurement' is used throughout, it should be noted that this includes the full continuum of measurement; from outcomes, to impacts, and to social value in its widest sense.

2   Research methodology

2.1   The nature of this project was very much that of a fact-finding mission. There is within Ireland a dearth of written materials relating to the topic of impact measurement and it was therefore acknowledged from the outset that the vast majority of information would have to be sourced directly from individuals.

2.2   The consultant and The Wheel's Director of Advocacy drew up a list of potentially useful persons to speak to. This list was modified during the course of research as different individuals were identified. In total, thirteen interviews were conducted; nine were held face-to-face, with a further four taking place over the telephone. An interview guide was used to ensure all aspects of the topic were given due consideration. Extensive written notes were taken.

2.3   A further six people provided useful signposts. The consultant's own experience of impact measurement supplemented the views of the interviewees and allowed meaningful analysis to take place.

3   History of impact measurement

3.1   Over the past 15 to 20 years, there has been a growing focus within the Irish community and voluntary sector on the need for good governance, planning, quality assurance and evaluation. For organisations in receipt of statutory, foundation, corporate, and especially of European Union funding, undertaking evaluations has been the norm for many years. However, such evaluations have been largely focused on outputs and processes and have tended to be retrospective.

3.2   Attempting to measure the actual difference made by programmes is a much more recent phenomenon, which commenced approximately 10 years ago, but which has only gained wider recognition in the past few years.

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[1]   http://www.wheel.ie/news/impact-measurement-grant-fund-project

3.3   There was a flurry of interest in social auditing around the year 2000, which led to the establishment of the Institute of Social Auditing of Ireland [2]. Organisations funded under the Social Economy programme of the national training agency FÁS, received funding to undertake social auditing training [3] and to implement social auditing in their organisations. Approximately 50 organisations did so over a period of around five years, but there was a lack of understanding by funders of how to deal with the results of social audits. Interest was not sustained either at central or local level.

4   The present state of impact measurement

4.1   'Embryonic', 'poor', 'behind', 'sporadic', 'fragmented' and 'patchy' were some of the words used by interviewees to describe the underdeveloped nature of social impact measurement in Ireland today. The majority of organisations is not yet speaking the language of impact measurement and does not yet recognise that this is an area that deserves consideration. This appears to be the case for both social enterprises and for community and voluntary organisations.

4.2   Notwithstanding, the landscape for impact measurement is changing. There is a burgeoning interest that is now gathering some momentum. Without doubt, outcomes and impacts are being discussed more widely. For example, individuals are starting to undertake postgraduate study in this field, articles are being written [4], training courses are being delivered, conferences are being held that focus on impact [5] [6] [7], and advertisements are being placed for jobs with titles such as 'Quality and Impact Manager' [8] and 'Head of Impact' [9].

4.3   Change is not limited to talk. Some organisations are now starting to measure their outcomes, impacts and social value, but there are noticeable differences across the community, voluntary and social enterprise sectors. Some subsectors are relatively developed, others less so. There can also be significant differences between organisations working within the same subsector, or even between different programmes within individual organisations. For example, impact measurement is quite advanced within the international development subsector, but this does not generally hold true for smaller organisations working in this subsector. Also, whilst these organisations are becoming increasingly sophisticated about measuring their overseas impact, they tend to focus far less on measuring the impact of their domestic development education programmes.

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[2]   http://www.partas.ie/Consultancy/SocialAuditing.aspx
[3]   Training was designed and delivered by Partas, http://www.partas.ie, and verified by the Institute of Social Auditing.
[4]   For example: Velthuis, Sandra, From outputs to outcomes, *Public Affairs Ireland Journal*, October 2011, p. 7
[5]   http://www.whatsworkingforchildren.org
[6]   http://www.crossborder.ie/news/cross-border-training-and-impact-assessment-international-conference-date is-27-28-october
[7]   http://www.youth.ie/sites/youth.ie/files/NYCI_038_A5_proof_08.pdf
[8]   Dóchas: The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations, http://www.dochas.ie
[9]   Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, http://www.socialentrepreneurs.ie

4.4   There has been significant progress amongst some multi-partner social change initiatives for children and young people and their families. The Atlantic Philanthropies [10], together with the state, are funding a number of significant projects that are rigorously capturing learning on what interventions do (and do not) work, using randomised control trials and other complex evaluation techniques, through the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme for Children. These include the Childhood Development Initiative [11], Young Ballymun [12] and others. Within this particular field, Ireland has, in the words of one interviewee, 'leap-frogged' ahead of its European counterparts.

5   Enablers and barriers

5.1   Drivers for impact measurement

5.1.1   The situation in Ireland has doubtlessly been influenced by progress in other jurisdictions. This is of course particularly true for overseas development organisations, whose very nature is international and who, since the 2003 Paris Declaration have increasingly focused on the 'aid effectiveness' agenda [13]. However, all organisations now operate in an increasingly globalised environment, in which online information is readily available and in which international links are easily made and maintained. During the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' years, Ireland experienced both an influx of foreign workers and the return of Irish people who had previously worked overseas, all bringing with them from those countries new ideas and ways of working. The United Kingdom and North America were particularly significant in this regard, but other places such as South Africa and the Netherlands also appear to have played a role.

5.1.2   The not-for-profit and social enterprise sectors have also been influenced by the corporate world. Increasingly, there have been calls for them to adopt 'business ways of thinking'. The simplistic assumptions that business somehow has all the answers for addressing social need and that a wholesale transfer of business ideas would either be practical or desirable have gained some traction, but have not been universally accepted. At the same time as social purpose organisations were starting to question themselves about measuring their impact, similar questions were being asked by businesses as part of their corporate social responsibility agendas.

5.1.3   There has also been a recent growth in infrastructure and support organisations that has helped to drive the impact agenda. Examples include Carmichael Centre for Voluntary Groups [14], Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, The Wheel and Volunteering Ireland [15].

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[10]   A private foundation which has been a significant funder within Ireland for many years, although it will cease operations here in 2016, http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org
[11]   http://www.twcdi.ie
[12]   http://www.youngballymun.org
[13]   For further information, see http://www.un-ngls.org/article.php3?id_article=451. Thinking in this field has now progressed to 'development (as opposed to aid) effectiveness'.
[14]   This organisation recently published its 'Impact Network' http://www.carmichaelcentre.ie
[15]   Now merged with Volunteer Centres Ireland and called Volunteer Ireland, http://www.volunteer.ie, it previously ran two annual conferences at which the social value of volunteering was explored.

5.1.4   A further driver has been the rise of the rights-based movement, as advocated for particularly strongly by the physical disability subsector. More assertive clients are increasingly demanding a more user-centred approach to service delivery, which by implication requires organisations to assess if their clients' needs are truly being met.

5.1.5   Arguably the most significant drivers, however, have been funders. Over time, (some) private foundations have become more outcome-focused themselves, which has inevitably influenced their programming, funding and evaluation strategies. This is particularly true for The Atlantic Philanthropies and the One Foundation [16], which are both exiting Ireland in the coming years and which wish to leave a positive legacy with replicable projects. Philanthropists [17] and social finance funders [18] that perceive themselves as investors, as opposed to grant-makers, naturally require that they see a (social) return on that investment. Even individual donors are beginning to ask themselves, in a more deliberate manner, what difference their money is making.

5.1.6   However, by far the most significant funder of the community and voluntary sector in Ireland is the state. A small number of examples can be found of a statutory drive towards impact measurement, especially within certain semi-states. This appears to be due primarily to the influence of key individuals within those agencies who have a clear appreciation of the issues. Irish Aid [19] now demands that well-established organisations that it supports through its Civil Society Fund use a 'theory of change' model (see section 5.7.2) to articulate the change they are hoping to make at beneficiary, systemic or policy levels. The Family Support Agency [20] worked with Nexus Research [21] and local Family Resource Centres to implement an integrated planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting system (see section 5.7.9). The National Disability Authority recently published a research report on outcome indicators [22].

5.1.7   There is one further example that is of particular significance within Ireland. The Centre for Effective Services [23] is a joint initiative of The Atlantic Philanthropies and two government departments [24], which promotes an evidence-informed approach to working with children and families and the communities that they live in. When it was set up in 2008, it was tasked with undertaking a review of two major state-funded local development programmes and designing a new programme that interpreted national policy goals in a consistent manner at local level. The new Local Community Development Programme, which is managed by Pobal [25], is more outcome-focused and makes use of a logic model that is largely predefined at national level. The review, planning and implementation processes were highly charged politically, for they were accompanied by major restructuring, significant funding cuts, a lack of stakeholder consultation and inadequate piloting. Pobal recently introduced its Integrated Reporting and Information System (IRIS) for planning and tracking, but this is very output-focused, mainly because the organisation does not have responsibility for evaluating the programme's impact at either local or national level.

16	The One Foundation is due to cease operations in 2013, http://www.onefoundation.ie
17	See Philanthropy Ireland, http://philanthropy.ie
18	For example, Clann Credo, http://www.clanncredo.ie
19	http://www.irishaid.gov.ie
20	http://www.fsa.ie
21	http://www.nexus.ie
22	National Disability Authority, *A Review of International Outcome Measures in Disability Service Provision*, 2010, http://www.nda.ie/cntmgmtnew.nsf/0/F4DC16FB94B8D54F8025787F003F91EE?OpenDocument
23	http://www.effectiveservices.org
24	Department of Children and Youth Affairs, http://www.dcya.gov.ie and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, http://www.environ.ie/en
25	An intermediary organisation, https://www.pobal.ie

5.1.8   Whilst it is possible to identify pockets of progressive policy (and to a lesser extent, practice) for impact measurement, most statutory funders are still very much focused on counting outputs. The demand is almost solely on accountability for public funds, which leads to what one interviewee described as 'bean counting', another as 'inspectorial evaluations'. As a result, organisations tend to devote their energies to what they view as compliance with statutory requirements, instead of evaluating for learning. This situation is likely to remain unless funders radically change their position on this.

5.1.9   Many organisations have a multitude of reporting requirements for different funders, none of which is being systematically gathered and analysed to assess their overall impact. This is just one symptom of a much broader issue, which is the lack of mutual understanding and respect between funders and those that they fund.

5.1.10 Clearly, the shrinking of the Irish economy over recent years has, in the words of one interviewee 'brought about a national reality check', which has accelerated the 'value-for-money' debate. Community and voluntary organisations have to compete for a pot of ever-shrinking resources and must justify any proposed expenditure to a far greater extent. This is fast becoming the most important driver of the impact measurement agenda.

5.2   Understanding of impact measurement

5.2.1   Although there are notable exceptions, understanding of impact measurement in Ireland is generally poor. People are beginning to use the jargon of impact measurement, but their comprehension of the key concepts behind it is often superficial. This is evidenced by the regular incorrect use of impact measurement terminology. For example, amongst practitioners, there is a common assumption that the words 'outcomes' and 'impacts' automatically imply something positive, with little recognition that they can also be neutral or negative. Another example comes from statutory funders, who often require monitoring and evaluation data from organisations on defined and mutually exclusive target groups (lone mothers, young people, drug users, etc), which not only leads to over-counting, but in no way recognises the multi-dimensional nature of disadvantage.

5.2.2   A particularly problematic consequence is that the true nature of impact is not understood. Real social change requires action by many players, often over long periods of time. This sits uneasily within politically-driven systems that take short-term decisions, including decisions about which social purpose organisations to fund. In their quest for funding, these organisations will frequently over-claim what their proposed programmes will achieve, thereby perpetuating the problem. Far more emphasis should be placed on outcomes, over which the organisations can fairly be expected to have some control. Specifically, this should including intermediary outcomes, which the consultant believes are particularly neglected at present.

5.3   Attitudes towards impact measurement

5.3.1   Given that understanding of impact measurement is low, true attitudes towards it are difficult to assess. It is easy, for example, to dismiss something if one does not understand it. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring attitudes that might potentially have an influence on the likelihood of impact measurement taking place, within the context of cultural norms. There are both historical and contemporary factors at play.

5.3.2   As a country with a history of colonialism that has been independent for less than a century, Ireland has a negative experience of servility and often mistakes the giving of good service as being the same thing. Unfortunately therefore, the 'customer' (read 'client' or 'service user') is not always king within the not-for-profit sector, and there is as a result less focus on outcomes than there ought to be.

5.3.3   It can also be argued that Ireland's current political system exemplifies clientelism. As such, policy-making tends to be relationship-based instead of evidence-based. This regularly results in mediocrity, which is often tolerated.

5.3.4   Furthermore, there exists a certain degree of anti-intellectualism. Reflection is often regarded as navel-gazing. The Irish ability to 'just get on with it' – without the need for written manuals and the like – is much admired. The current national debate about public sector reform blindly regards, in the words of one interviewee, 'all frontline staff as sacrosanct angels and all administrators as lazy pen-pushers'. If people have this mindset, it is very difficult to promote ideas such as impact measurement. Within not-for-profits, organisations are rarely prepared to invest any significant time into developing vision and mission statements as part of their strategic planning processes, regarding these as jargon and a waste of time. Without clarity on these overarching questions, however, it is virtually impossible to measure impact.

5.3.5   Civil society developed differently in Ireland than it did in many other countries. It is a country with a highly centralised government structure. In many other jurisdictions, local government works closely with community-based organisations to seek solutions to local problems. In Ireland, on the other hand, the local government structure is underdeveloped and disempowered.

5.3.6   Until very recently, the Roman Catholic Church played a pervasive role in Irish society. Although its influence has waned, the emerging rights and entitlements movement (see section 5.1.4) still does not sit comfortably amongst many people brought up in the Roman Catholic tradition.

5.3.7   Many organisations still reflect the traditional charity model, in which simply 'helping people' (especially known individuals), was good enough by itself, without needing to measure the difference made. Up until recently, most organisations addressed the symptoms of social problems by offering specific services. Although advocacy initiatives that seek to address the root causes of social problems are gaining popularity, this type of work remains underdeveloped. A great number of organisations still perceive themselves as (reluctant) providers of services that they firmly believe government ought to be delivering. As a result, many feel that they have a natural entitlement to public funds. There are signs that this is beginning to change and that organisations are starting to see themselves as stewards of those funds.

5.3.8   It is often easier for smaller, newly formed organisations to adopt new ways of thinking and working than it is for more established organisations. The latter can feel they are being undermined if they are asked to question what they may have been doing for decades. Many of these organisations also operate in a very hierarchical manner and are not used to involving all stakeholders (including, crucially, clients) in decision-making processes, which acts as a further barrier to impact measurement. Poor succession planning can compound this, for it can result in insufficient numbers of new people with new ideas being brought into older organisations.

5.3.9   Within the community development subsector, there appears to be some level of ideological opposition to impact measurement. The community development process is considered to be as important as any final results that accrue from that process, possibly more so. Indeed, that is its strength and is what differentiates it from mainstream service providers. People feel, with some justification, that impact measurement frameworks such as logic models do not adequately capture the process.

5.3.10 Ireland is currently ranked 19th in an annual index of corruption perception [26]. The social sector is not immune from this. Some organisations lack integrity and 'massage' figures in order to 'prove' positive outcomes and ensure they receive continued funding.

5.3.11 In spite of all the attitudinal/cultural factors discussed above, there is a definite and growing interest in good impact measurement. Organisations are increasingly conscious about the need to be able to capture the difference made. Even those who are unsure can often be convinced without too much effort. They simply do not know what is the best way of doing it.

5.4   Perceived costs, benefits and risks of impact measurement

5.4.1   Perceived costs, benefits and risks are inextricably linked to the understanding of impact measurement and the attitudes towards impact measurement, as discussed in the preceding two sections.

5.4.2   It is an inevitable fact of life that some people do not like change, especially if that change feels enforced. People are feeling very threatened by the current economic situation. At times of stress, there is a tendency to become rather blinkered and to revert to 'tried and tested' ways of working. However inadequate the status quo, at least it is known. It is ironic that at a time when innovation is most needed, risk aversion is stifling it, from both the funder and practitioner sides.

5.4.3   Overburdened organisations often only make changes when, as one interviewee described it, 'there is a clear and present danger', citing the example of putting in place child protection policies and procedures because these became a legal requirement. Another interviewee drew an interesting analogy. Nobody goes into business in order to do financial analysis and reporting. However, they undertake this as part of their work because they acknowledge its importance. There is not yet universal recognition that social impact analysis and reporting is equally important. Specifically, just as management accounts are far more useful to organisations than end-of-year accounts, because they allow tracking of progress and highlight potential problems, so a culture in which constant impact monitoring takes place is far superior than a sole end-of-term evaluation.

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[26]   http://www.rte.ie/news/2011/1201/corruption.html

5.4.4   Organisations that have a culture of learning will see the necessity and usefulness of impact measurement more readily than those who are more resistant to change. There is a clear need to show organisations that the benefits of impact measurement far outweigh the costs. This will require a 'carrot and stick' approach. It needs to be demonstrated that impact measurement is a way of helping them achieve what they set out to do when they were originally founded. They must be assisted to recognise that it is not additional work, but a different way of approaching all that they do, in order to improve their efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability. A much more explicit link must be made between a focus on outcomes/impacts and other strands of organisational development, such as governance, strategic planning, performance management, marketing and evaluation.

5.4.5   As with any change, it must be managed carefully. Change that requires a radical shift in thinking may be particularly slow, which will frustrate those individuals within organisations who are more eager to move ahead. There are numerous fears that have to be overcome, as described below.

5.4.6   There reigns a very basic uneasiness that is rarely articulated. It is far easier to say one is providing a service (output) than to accept one is potentially changing a person's life through the provision or non-provision of that service (outcome).

5.4.7   There is also a deep-rooted fear of finding out (or rather, 'being found out') that one has not had the impact that was intended. Organisations are incredibly reluctant to admit that programmes have not gone according to plan. Some simply do not tell funders the truth (see section 5.3.10); others are very opaque when reporting back to funders; yet others cherry-pick clients to ensure low success rates are minimised. Lessons of 'failure' are rarely shared. When funders become aware that the desired results have not been achieved for whatever reason, they are seemingly equally reluctant to take constructive action, for fear of damaging the organisations' (and possibly their own) reputations. Instead of engaging in a learning discussion with the organisation and other relevant stakeholders, funding is quietly terminated.

5.4.8   This hesitancy to share evaluation results is part of a wider problem of inadequate sharing of information within the community, voluntary and social enterprise sectors, which can lead to delays and the wasting of precious resources. For example, some years ago, the consultant was commissioned by one charity to undertake research into the different, but related, area of quality management systems for community and voluntary groups. This research was not disseminated and one year later, another charity undertook almost identical research that came to the same conclusions.

5.4.9   High quality impact measurement also requires organisations to be willing to acknowledge that other organisations play key roles in effecting change, which means that they must be willing to share the credit for positive outcomes and impacts. This has not always been the case up to now.

5.4.10 There must also be acceptance that impact measurement by its very nature should and will weed out programmes within organisations that are not optimising change, as well as entire organisations that are not performing to an adequate standard. Whilst this is clearly a risk for those particular programmes and organisations, it is ultimately for the greater public good and must be recognised as such. There is presently a great reluctance to do this.

5.5 Skills and knowledge for impact measurement

5.5.1 From the evidence presented thus far, it is unsurprising that skills and knowledge for impact measurement are quite low. This is true for both funders and practitioners. Not having actively engaged in this way of thinking, not-for-profit organisations and social enterprises are unpractised and unversed in the art of impact measurement. Even senior managers often find it difficult to articulate the change their organisations are trying to bring about.

5.5.2 The skills deficit in some organisations is major. Whilst it may be a truism that there is particularly low capacity for impact measurement in smaller, community-based organisations, there are exceptions to that rule.

5.5.3 There are many organisations that already have the raw ingredients that can be relatively easily built upon for impact measurement, such as research, analytical and report writing skills.

5.5.4 One interviewee noted that there is a particular dearth within Ireland of people with the skills to undertake rigorous case studies [27].

5.6 Resources for impact measurement

5.6.1 Like any organisational activity, impact measurement requires resourcing. The financial cost of impact measurement was not regarded by interviewees as being a significant barrier, however. Irish organisations have considerable experience of delivering projects with very little money.

5.6.2 A lack of time for impact measurement was repeatedly mentioned as being the most significant obstacle. This can be viewed as an easy excuse, because time must be made for activities that are judged to be important. However, in the current economic climate in which numerous cuts have been made and continue to be made, organisations are, in the words of more than one interviewee 'on the edge of the precipice'. They have great difficulty finding time to consider these issues, especially within smaller organisations. Reflection time is often (wrongly) perceived as being time away from 'real work'.

5.7 Tools and systems for impact measurement

5.7.1 At present, a range of different conceptual frameworks, systems, methodologies and tools is in use for impact measurement. There is a strong sense amongst people that a common approach is lacking, but a similarly powerful feeling that standardisation across a very diverse sector is neither feasible nor desirable. Finding a meaningful, proportionate system that is useful to all stakeholders remains 'the holy grail'. Furthermore, there is a complete absence of frameworks that capture systemic change across entire social problems.

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[27] For example: http://www.kuehne-nagel.com/extranet/fileadmin/nacora/files/Building%20Theories%20from%20Case%20Study%20Research.pdf

5.7.2   There are early signs that the theory of change concept is beginning to be adopted. Linked to this, logic models are starting to be used more widely. However, without a thorough grounding in the theory of change, such models can sometimes end up being very illogical! Notwithstanding, these overarching concepts have the potential to be used by any sized organisation working in any field.

5.7.3   As previously mentioned (section 4.4), there are now a number of randomised controlled trials being used in Ireland, but these are the exception rather than the rule, and this situation is unlikely to change, given the time and cost implications of such an approach. Some Irish international development organisations are also involved in randomised controlled trials, but again, numbers are very limited, with systems such as log frames, appreciative inquiry, most significant change and outcome mapping being amongst many others used in the overseas context.

5.7.4   Some impact measurement methods adopt an arguably more quantitative approach. For example, some years ago, government commissioned a social cost benefit analysis of the Rural Social Scheme [28]. SROI methodology is also starting to be explored by a number of organisations, including the Ballymun Job Centre [29], Business in the Community Ireland [30], Extern [31] and Longford Community Resources [32]. Although it has its detractors who consider it too costly and complex, the principles of SROI are very sound and are valid across the board, even for those organisations that choose not to undertake a full SROI analysis.

5.7.5   Some organisations have chosen to adopt more tailor-made approaches. For example, the Rialto Youth Project [33] has developed a custom-made database to track change for the young people with whom it works. The Athy Alternative Project [34] has adapted the Outcomes Star [35], originally developed in the United Kingdom, for its work with ex-offenders. The West Limerick Primary Health Care Project for Travellers [36] has used the Scottish Learning Evaluation And Planning (LEAP) model [37] as the basis for a customised planning, monitoring and evaluation framework.

5.7.6   There has also been some growth in the use of quality standards and performance management tools.   These include the balanced scorecard approach, the European Foundation For Quality Management Excellence Model, Excellence Through People and ISO 9000. These are of some – but arguably of limited – relevance when discussing impact measurement.

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[28]   McInerney, Chris, *A Social Cost Benefit Analysis of the Rural Social Scheme*, Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs and Pobal, 2009
[29]   http://www.bmunjob.ie
[30]   http://www.bitc.ie
[31]   http://www.extern.org
[32]   http://www.lcrl.ie
[33]   http://www.rialtocommunitynetwork.ie/localorganisatio.html
[34]   http://kildare.ie/countycouncil/townsites/community-groups/details.asp?CAID=267
[35]   http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk
[36]   http://www.wlr.ie/primary-health-care-project
[37]   http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/12/05101807/1

5.7.7   The PQASSO system [38], which was developed by Charities Evaluation Services in the United Kingdom, is currently being promoted by Carmichael Centre for Voluntary Groups [39] and the Disability Federation of Ireland [40]. It is not focused on impact measurement but does have a section on 'user centred service' and another on 'monitoring and evaluation'. It is relatively simple to use and as such can be argued to break the ground for more involved impact measurement, amongst organisations that are not yet ready to do so.

5.7.8   On the other side of the spectrum, overseas development organisations are increasingly moving towards results based management; a highly complex and rigorous way of managing and measuring change that emanated from Canada. The required capacity for this type of approach is not currently present here (see section 5.5).

5.7.9   An intermediary solution may be provided by systems such as the Strategic Planning Evaluation And Knowledge (SPEAK) networking system [41] developed around six years ago by Nexus Research and now used by all Family Resource Centres and Sports Partnerships, by some counselling, drugs and youth projects, as well as by a number of individual organisations. It describes itself as 'a participatory evaluation and management support system … [offering] organisations and programmes a set of tools that enable a deeper understanding of the relationship between planning and priorities, efforts and resources expended, and outputs, outcomes and impacts, and in the process pro-actively [engaging] ongoing participation of stakeholders' [42]. It claims not be in competition with other methods and tools, and signposts these as part of its integrated, standardised process. It uses customised software that allows the systematic collection of information from different organisations (including good practice examples) that can be used by these organisations, as well as by funders. The SPEAK system has been rolled out to Cambodia, Germany, France, Northern Ireland and Poland, with further countries in the pipeline. One Nexus Research member is working on a full-time basis with Actknowledge [43] in the United States to develop applications of SPEAK there.

5.7.10 Some companies are publicising information technology systems for tracking outcomes and impacts [44]. These are usually based on customer relationship management software. Technological developments certainly offer the ability to facilitate client data management, real-time tracking, numerical analysis, etc. However, it is the consultant's firm opinion that it is imperative to have a good understanding of the process of change and the basic concepts of impact measurement before rushing head first into any new software programmes.

5.8   Other supports for impact measurement

5.8.1   Because of the underdeveloped state of impact measurement in Ireland, the associated support market is not large at present. A number of organisations have sought assistance from Northern Irish sources [45] and from further afield, and whilst this can bring in a useful

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38   http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/index.cfm?pg=42
39   http://www.carmichaelcentre.ie
40   http://www.disability-federation.ie
41   http://www.nexus.ie/index.php?page=speak
42   Speak Consulting, *An introduction to SPEAK*, 16 February 2011
43   http://www.actknowledge.org
44   For example, http://www.socialimpacttracker.org
45   For example, Community Evaluation Northern Ireland, http://www.ceni.org and Gauge http://www.gaugeni.co.uk

fresh perspective, it is widely recognised that support must be easily available in-country.

5.8.2   There are a number of individuals and organisations that are already offering a support role in this field and/or that could do so in the future. There is a definite role for intermediary and umbrella organisations, especially The Wheel, but also for example, Carmichael Centre for Voluntary Groups, the Centre for Effective Services, the Disability Federation of Ireland, Dóchas, Social Entrepreneurs Ireland, Tosach [46] and the emerging socialenterprise.ie network [47]. There are also supports that are connected with particular methodologies, including Nexus/SPEAK Consulting and the Institute of Social Auditing of Ireland. Furthermore, there are independent consultants/evaluators with an interest and certain level of expertise [48]. Finally, at least one private company has commenced operations in this field [49].

5.8.3   If funders wish the organisations that they support financially to make impact measurement a priority, they have a certain responsibility to resource this, both financially and otherwise. There is evidence of such an approach amongst foundations and there may therefore be a role for the European Venture Philanthropy Association [50], which currently has five members in Ireland. This approach appears to be lacking amongst most statutory funders. For example, Pobal previously had a team of people to provide capacity building support to community groups, but these have been mostly made redundant and it therefore no longer has the human resources to provide adequate support.

5.8.4   A range of supports is necessary in order to effect and sustain impact measurement. Firstly, awareness must be raised, in order to explain what impact measurement is and why it is important. Seminars, training courses, articles and similar (especially those that showcase success stories), all have a role to play in this regard. Secondly, it must be made as easy as possible for people to start the process of impact measurement. There is a need for simple practical tools, clear guidance materials, including a web-based portal to useful resources. Thirdly, one-to-one tailored supports are necessary for those organisations that do not yet have the internal capacity to do this alone; these may be required over an extended period of time. Fourthly, it is important that none of this happens in isolation; lessons must be shared and peer support provided through a range of publicity and networking activities.

5.8.5   It is likely that many organisations will feel overwhelmed at the beginning of their impact journey. They can be encouraged to start small and to build up gradually. However, it is essential that they assess the full effects of the change brought about by their organisations in the medium- to long-term. Unless they do so, there is a real danger of not seeing the bigger picture; that is, their ultimate impact. This idea must therefore be reiterated throughout the support process.

5.8.6   Finally, it has become apparent during the course of this research that the need for support is as great amongst funders as it is amongst social purpose organisations. Awareness must therefore be raised amongst funders also.

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[46]   http://www.tosach.ie/s
[47]   http://www.socialenterprise.ie
[48]   For example http://sheilacahill.ie and http://www.whitebarn.info
[49]   http://www.outcomes.ie
[50]   http://evpa.eu.com

5.9   Other factors

5.9.1   Another major stumbling block is Ireland's data deficit. Organisations operate in an environment that is not rich in accessible data. Sometimes this is because the data simply have not been collected. At other times, they have been collected (via the Census for example), but their full implications have not been analysed across different government departments. Furthermore, unlike countries which have highly integrated systems that track individuals' use across a range of services (for example, Denmark), Ireland has completely different systems for education, health, social welfare, tax, voluntary organisations, etc. Another factor is the lack of data sharing protocols between departments at both national and local level and between statutory and non-statutory services; data protection legislation is usually cited as the reason for this.

5.9.2   There are presently insufficient linkages between the academic research community and social purpose organisations. Although there are a handful of exceptions [51], there is a lack of high quality action research over extended periods of time, as research funding practices militate against this. There is an Irish Evaluation Network [52] under the aegis of Dublin City University, but it is not very active and does not link in to any significant extent with the community, voluntary or social enterprise sectors.

5.9.3   Finally, there has been a lack of leadership in this whole area to date. Impact measurement needs champions in all sectors of society and within individual organisations. Although these are starting to appear, the process is far from complete.

6   The future of impact measurement

6.1   Future initiatives

6.1.1   In August 2011, a delegation of around 60 Irish practitioners, policy makers and researchers attended the Global Implementation Conference in Washington DC [53]. This group of people continues to discuss and network.

6.1.2   The Community and Voluntary Pillar of the national Social Partnership process recently drafted possible input and outcome indicators for high-level goals contained within two key government policy documents [54]. They are presently awaiting the response of the Department of Social Protection.

6.1.3   Nexus Research has submitted a funding proposal to the European Commission for a major multi-partner research project to highlight the inherent contradiction in the top-down versus bottom-up approaches to evaluation.

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[51]   For example, Dublin City University's work with Young Ballymun http://www.youngballymun.org/our_work/evaluation, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Child and Family Research Centre at the National University of Ireland Galway, http://childandfamilyresearch.ie/supporting-innovation-policy-services-and-practices and the Trinity International Development Initiative at Trinity College Dublin, http://www.tcd.ie/tidi

[52]   http://www.dcu.ie/education_studies/ien/index.shtml

[53]   http://www.implementationconference.org

[54]   *Towards 2016: Ten-Year Framework Social Partnership Agreement 2006-2015* and the *National Action Plan on Social Inclusion*

6.1.4   A training course entitled 'From outputs to outcomes' is being run (for the second time in a four-month period) by Public Affairs Ireland in February 2012 [55].

6.1.5   In early 2012, The Wheel will produce a community and voluntary sector resource guide on the topic of adopting an outcomes focus. This will be followed by related initiatives to raise awareness and build capacity.

6.1.6   Gauge intends to hold a social impact summit during 2012 and is keen for this to be a cross-border event.

6.1.7   A revitalisation of the Institute of Social Auditing of Ireland is planned for 2012.

6.1.8   The Disability Federation of Ireland is bringing Charities Evaluation Services over from England during 2012 to deliver outcomes training to its 127 members.

6.1.9   Social Entrepreneurs Ireland is currently trying to develop a comprehensive system for impact measurement, including measures of organisational capacity, measures to show how organisations are using their capacity to produce results, and measures to assess the extent to which the overall problem at hand is being addressed.

6.1.10 Pobal, as part of its overall change management strategy, is currently assessing how best to measure the cumulative impact of all its programmes.

6.1.11 In around two years' time, the Centre for Effective Services will publish the results of its learning.

6.2   Remaining gaps

6.2.1   It is clear that there remain numerous gaps. These have been highlighted throughout the text and are not repeated here. However, a number of issues that warrant further consideration.

6.2.2   There is a complete lack of clarity in Ireland about the 'big questions'. What does a socially inclusive community look like? What does social cohesion actually mean? How does one define well-being? What are the appropriate roles of central government, local government, the private sector, the not-for-profit sector, academia, etc? Unless the change that is strived for is somehow defined, with some level of coherence as to how and by whom that change will be brought about, Ireland will continue to fumble in the dark.

6.2.3   The debate about impact measurement should not be restricted to social purpose organisations; it should also include the state, business, etc. Social and environmental problems are a reflection of systemic failure and they require systemic response. Government must eventually drive this forward and the next National Development Plan (2014) should explicitly tackle the impact question. Before that time, the community, voluntary and social enterprise sectors have the opportunity and responsibility to engage with government on this issue, proactively and with an united voice.

6.2.4   There are many opportunities for joint working that have yet to be capitalised upon. More formal links could be established across sectors, but also between organisations within the not-for-profit sector.

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[55]   http://www.whitebarn.info/s/new-training-course-from-outputs-to-outcomes

6.2.5   The legitimate need that funders have for accountability must be balanced with a critical understanding of the change process and organisations' ability to influence this change positively. The 'command and control' model in which funders defined goals, gave grants to those that they hoped might meet these goals, and provided some money towards inadequate evaluations that were generally ignored, was bereft of responsibility and is no longer acceptable.

6.2.6   The focus from now on must be on 'strategic learning' and 'utilisation focused evaluation' [56]. Impact measurement should not be viewed in isolation; it must be integrated with the whole organisational development agenda. Funders can incentivise and support this in a number of ways that include: engaging in joint scenario planning; requiring outcomes-focused initial plans; ensuring logical evaluation frameworks and data collection systems are in place at the start of programmes; sharing information about what worked and what did not work; and by continuing to fund evidence-informed programmes. Critically, funded organisations also have a responsibility to stop advocating for something if (good) research provides evidence that it does not work.

6.2.7   There are two final significant gaps. The first relates to how one effectively measures collective impact. Although cluster evaluations and impact networks are being discussed, this is a totally underdeveloped area. The second relates to the absence of quality control measures [57] for impact measurement, which raises questions about the potential need for standards and external verification.

7   Conclusion

7.1   Although it can be argued that Ireland is 'behind' in terms of its progress, it should also be acknowledged that the whole field of impact measurement is still in its infancy. There is undoubtedly significant scope for development of impact measurement within Ireland, yet there are also examples of highly advanced initiatives that it can share with the world. On the whole, social purpose organisations are receptive to the idea of impact measurement, but require supports in order to progress it. Funders also require education on impact measurement. There is now a clear need for different actors to come together to adopt a coherent approach towards impact measurement. This ought to be possible in a country as small as Ireland.

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[56]   http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book229324
[57]   The accreditation and assurance process of the SROI Network is a notable exception, http://www.sroi-uk.org

NOTES:

The Wheel is a representative and support body for community, voluntary and charitable organisations; a one-stop-shop for and about the Irish not-for-profit sector. Established in 1999, it now has almost 900 members, including most of the country's largest charities and many more smaller and medium-sized groups. It also works with many non-members within Ireland's highly diverse community and voluntary sector to strengthen the sector's capacity and capability.

www.wheel.ie

This report is supported by:

The Calouste Gulkenkian Foundation is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational, social and scientific interests, based in Lisbon with offices in London and Paris. The purpose of the UK Branch is to help enrich and connect the experiences of people in the UK and Ireland and secure lasting and beneficial change. We have a special interest in supporting those who are most disadvantaged and we place a particular emphasis on maximising the beneficial impact of our work through encouraging cross-border exchanges of lessons and experiences. As a small branch of an international foundation we can be nimble but cannot provide large-scale continuous funding. As part of one of the largest European foundations we are well positioned to address transnational issues and can act as an 'exchange' for ideas.

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