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economics as if people and the planet mattered

Seven principles for measuring what matters

A guide to effective public policy-making

Measuring What Matters | 4

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nef (the new economics foundation) is a registered charity founded in 1986 by the leaders of The Other Economic Summit (TOES), which forced issues such as international debt onto the agenda of the G8 summit meetings. It has taken a lead in helping establish new coalitions and organisations such as the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign; the Ethical Trading Initiative; the UK Social Investment Forum; and new ways to measure social and economic well-being.

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Measurement matters. It matters because it both reflects and reproduces the priorities of government. Ultimately, it determines where public resources are allocated and therefore what goals will be pursued.

Investment in public services has increased since the foundation of the welfare state in the 1940s, yet economic inequality is wider now than it was 60 years ago. The place and circumstances of our birth remains a major predictor of our future health, educational and economic prospects. Returns on investment have been low and it is our contention that measurement has played a central role in this.

In the Measuring What Matters programme we set out to develop ways of measuring and valuing that will help us to build effective public services. Our research across three very different policy areas – economic development, children in care and criminal justice – found that making visible and valuing the outcomes that matter most to individuals, communities and society leads to more informed policy-making. For instance, valuing the improved well-being of children in care – rather than focusing on the unit cost of delivering that care – could help ensure that more appropriate placement decisions are made.

Many of the social, economic and environmental outcomes which we measured and valued in the course of this research also turn out to have significant positive implications for the public purse. For example, the children of women offenders are likely to fare better in life if custodial sentences are eschewed in favour of community penalties that enable mothers to maintain contact with their children. In the short-term money is saved on social services provision for these children. In the longer-term there may be a reduced risk of children becoming offenders and a better chance of the kind of educational attainment and social adjustment that will translate into lower societal costs for welfare benefits and the criminal justice system.

Based on this research nef offers a set of principles for policy-makers that are a distillation of the findings. There is an urgent need for the adoption of approaches such as Social Return on Investment (SROI). We recommend that policy-makers embed the following principles across public services.

1. **Measure for social, economic and environmental outcomes**
   Measures should provide information that improves our understanding of the relationship between specific interventions and the well-being of individuals, communities and the environment. Measures should be focused on outcomes: the positive and negative change in people's lives, communities or the environment as a result of policy.

2. **Measure with people**
   The people who are closest to or most affected by an activity are uniquely positioned to identify its effects, whether positive or negative. They should therefore be involved as deeply as possible when creating and revising indicators. Without this input, measurement is unlikely to capture what really matters to people.

3. **Value the things that matter most**
   Financial considerations have a tendency to drive policy-making. It is only by making social and environmental outcomes visible and assessing them on the same terms as traditional costs and benefits that we can ensure that they are not squeezed out. Finding ways to quantify, value and account for negative outcomes is equally important, not just to get a fuller picture of the returns on investment but also to incentivise organisations to minimise them.

4. **Be responsive**
   Effective measures will provide evidence that can be used to inform future implementation and decision-making – but what is also required is that government is able and willing to learn from what the evidence says, and from past experience.

5. **Avoid over-claiming**
   Measures should identify the difference that particular policies have actually made, and how much of a policy's impact can be attributed to specific interventions. This helps to avoid double-counting of policy impacts and allows decision makers to pinpoint those policies that actually do bring about desired outcomes.

6. **Transparency and accountability should inform everything**
   Decisions makers should be able to justify why they have chosen the measures used. This involves making explicit the basis on which they have prioritised what to measure.

7. **Measure strengths as well as risks and deficits**
   Measuring people's strengths and abilities allows policy makers to focus on how best to enable people to succeed, rather than focusing solely – as many policies do – on what people lack and why they fail.

Our vision of what government decision-making should look like is therefore participative, responsive and focused on bringing about a more just and sustainable society – one that promotes real well-being for all, in the most comprehensive sense. In order to realise this vision, we believe that government should follow these principles to develop indicators, measures and systems that make measuring what matters an everyday reality.

Introduction

'There is a distinction to be made… between the sort of borrowing you incur to pay civil servants, for defence, or for schools and hospitals and what we are doing here, where we are taking an investment in two particular banks… those banks are worth a great deal… there is every reason to be confident that… the British taxpayer will get its money back.'

Alistair Darling, Chancellor of the Exchequer

The government has been quick to defend its propping up of the UK banking system not only as a necessity in the short term but also as a long-term 'investment' for which the taxpayer will ultimately be repaid. When it comes to public services, however, the value of government spending as an 'investment' in better social, environmental and economic outcomes tends not even to be properly quantified, let alone recognised and valued in these terms. Instead public spending – whether it is on preventive services, poverty alleviation or renewable energy – is often characterised as a necessary drain on public finances.

Research by **nef** (the new economics foundation) has shown that treating public service spending in this way misses opportunities to maximise public benefit. Under the banner of the Measuring What Matters programme we have sought to make visible and measurable the social, environmental and economic 'returns' that are enjoyed by society as a whole and by the individuals and communities directly affected when government invests in public services. The research, conducted in three policy areas, suggests that public spending can only be effective if policy-makers are weighing up, and learning from, what the people affected by their policies regard as success.

Measuring What Matters challenges the approach to spending on public services that sees efficiency only in narrow cost-saving terms, and places disproportionate value on direct financial returns.[1,2,3] This paper presents the main lessons from Measuring What Matters in the form of seven guiding principles for public service policy-making.

The focus on narrow financial considerations in public policy-making has not helped us to build effective public services. Investment in public services has increased since the foundation of the welfare state in the 1940s. Yet economic inequality is wider now than it was 60 years ago, and the place and circumstances of our birth are now a larger predictor of how we will end them.

Of course there have been successes: the NHS has played a part in ensuring that health disparities have not widened as dramatically as income inequalities. But returns on investment are still, at best, low. This is especially worrying In light of an impending environmental crisis that requires large-scale public investment – we cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past in the face of this new challenge.

Why has our public policy decision-making failed us in this way? The contention of the Measuring What Matters programme is that ways of measuring and valuing have a central part to play in this failure.

Financial measures that fail to take account of wider benefits are only able to tell us a limited amount about effectiveness. Furthermore, our research suggests that focusing chiefly on direct financial considerations can lead the whole direction of public policy-making dangerously astray. In the absence of good information about other kinds of value, narrow cost considerations can become the primary basis on which decisions are made. This can lead to false economies – savings being achieved in the short term at the expense of more significant costs over the longer term, or at the expense of negative consequences in other public policy domains.

In the Measuring What Matters programme we set out to develop ways of measuring and valuing that will help us to build effective public services. What gets measured is important because it both reflects and reproduces the priorities of government. Ultimately, it determines where public resources are allocated and therefore what goals will be pursued. Our research across three very different policy areas – economic development, children in care and criminal justice – found that making visible and valuing the outcomes that matter most to individuals, communities and society leads to more informed policy-making. For instance, making visible and valuing the improved well-being of children in care – rather than focusing on the unit cost of delivering that care – could help ensure that more appropriate placement decisions are made.

Financial considerations still have to be at the core of any decision-making. Public services are facing the twin challenge of rising needs and increasingly constrained resources. Yet direct financial considerations on their own are not very helpful in meeting these challenges. Many of the social, economic and environmental outcomes which we measured and valued in the course of this research also turn out to have significant positive implications for the public purse.

For example, the children of women offenders are likely to fare better in life if custodial sentences are eschewed in favour of community penalties that enable mothers to maintain contact with their children. In the short term money is saved on social services provision for these children. In the longer term there may be a reduced risk of children becoming offenders and a better chance of the kind of educational attainment and social adjustment that will translate into lower societal costs for welfare benefits and the criminal justice system.

While much of this is uncontroversial in principle, the implications of the approach we are advocating can be far-reaching. We used a concept called SROI to capture in monetary terms the value of social and environmental outcomes that are routinely left out of cost-benefit analyses. In the residential care example, this enabled us to weigh the social value of investing in higher-quality care against the unit cost of delivering that service. This in turn prompted us to consider a whole new range of costs and benefits in decision-making. The implications for a host of stakeholders had to be considered more thoroughly, pointing to a very different approach to policy development.

SROI is more than another technique of measuring; it is a different way of thinking about value that helps us negotiate trade-offs between competing priorities. It cannot displace making difficult decisions but it can provide us with the requisite information on which to base those decisions. With this in mind we have developed a series of principles that are a distillation of our findings from the research. Each is accompanied by guidance on what it means for policy-makers and those that wish to measure what matters. Whilst many of the recommendations are contained in the government's own guidance on economic appraisal, it is apparent that this is not routinely followed.

Before we discuss the implications that follow from each of the principles, we begin with a discussion of how policy-making became so narrowly focused, and why we do not currently have the right conditions for measuring what matters.

The rise of the audit culture and its impact on policy

'There is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult.'

John Maynard Keynes[4]

Accountability for public expenditure has been with us for a long time. The earliest surviving mention of a public official charged with auditing government expenditure is a reference to the Auditor of the Exchequer in 1314.[5]

Over the past three decades there has been a rapid intensification of the scrutiny applied to spending in the public sector. The academic Michael Power describes the period from the early 1980s onwards as a time when an 'audit explosion' created an 'audit society' – a policy environment in which monitoring and evaluation are a central component in the way government is done.[6]

The rise of audit culture is part of a sea change in public sector ethos that had its origins in the reforms of the Thatcher government and is closely connected to the emergence of New Public Management (NPM).[7] NPM sought to respond to the failure of the Keynesian welfare state by aligning the public sector more closely with the philosophy and approaches of the private sector. The aim was to replicate the efficiency imposed by the price mechanism and competition, under the assumption that this would ensure cost effectiveness.

This modernising agenda introduced the market imperative to public services. Efficiency became a key objective, and a new regime of performance management was put in place. With efficiency defined primarily in terms of the relationship of costs to outputs ('unit costs'), performance came to be measured through quantitative output indicators.

Managerialism – an approach that seeks to resolve problems primarily by improving the management of public organisations – was extended under New Labour. This presupposes that the main route to social progress is through increases in economically defined productivity arising from the use of technologies, with managers planning, implementing and measuring the increases in productivity. Under New Labour new centrally set targets were introduced to police this, and value-for-money assessments became commonplace. Evidence-based policy was trumpeted as breaking with the ideological past.

This managerial culture has developed plenty of evaluation tools to help assemble its evidence base, including systematic reviews, single studies, pilots and expert reports. Unfortunately there has been little regulation of the whole evaluation 'industry' that has sprung up, and too often there has been a lack of critical distance between evaluator and evaluated. As a result, insufficiently robust evaluations have allowed ineffective initiatives to continue in many policy areas.

While we recognise that the wider effects of a policy can take a long time to show themselves and so are difficult to include in policy deliberations – especially where environmental sustainability and intergenerational issues are considered – the time horizons of evaluations are still too short. The difficulty in capturing long-run outcomes is not reason enough to give up on them.

A tendency to focus on narrower and more short-term evaluation measures has been reinforced by the practical demands of appraising staff within the system. Staff performance performance appraisal tends to be conducted annually, which promotes an over-reliance on measuring outputs instead of outcomes. Outputs can be controlled by individuals and are more easily attributable to individual actions. Timescales may be too long for the appraisal process to capture outcomes, and these are more difficult to ascribe to specific actions.

For example, if work done with an unemployed person to help them build their social networks results in them starting a business five years later, the chain of events that led to this is difficult to unpack. Unless the steps along the way are measured and valued, then the 'success' of that intervention and the contributing factors are not captured. The often narrow and/or simplistic targets set for staff in various parts of the public sector are now a source of almost constant controversy.

Unfortunately, the reality of centralised target setting is that it often succeeds in creating staff accountability in one direction only – upwards and towards the centre. Even if a target is expressed in terms relevant to individuals affected by public services (e.g. that patients should have access to a GP appointment within 48 hours), there is often no guarantee that an individual can hold service providers or government to account if that target is not met in their individual case (e.g. if they are unable see a GP for three days). The form of most official measures thus precludes the prospect of people holding policy-makers to account.

Since 2007 some of the worst excesses of managerialism have been curtailed. Targets have been dismantled or restructured in many service areas and attempts have been made to minimise side-effects and pay more heed to outcomes. Despite the recent rhetoric emphasising the importance of outcomes, however, our basic critique still stands: that government does not adequately measure the effects of its policies on long-term social, economic and environment well-being. This is evident not only in the *content* of its measures but also in the *consequences* of their application: well-intentioned measures can still result in perverse outcomes.

It was in response to these developments that Measuring What Matters was initiated. Applying the concept of SROI to policy evaluation results in a more holistic approach that points us in different policy directions: it flags up the false economy inherent in bargaining down placement costs at the expense of quality for vulnerable children; it highlights the long-run benefits of investing in alternatives to prison for women even if apparently costly today; it demonstrates the need for economic development policy to innovate in how it reaches the long-term unemployed.

Measuring What Matters challenges the idea that difficulty or complexity in measurement is an excuse for relying on mechanics, or quantitative data alone, and suggests that different kinds of information and evidence can be aggregated in a way that is useful to decision-makers. This is not about measuring more things necessarily but about bringing meaning and value to how measurement is done. The principles we have derived from this work show that what is needed is not just better indicators, but also a change in culture across public services as sweeping as the changes introduced by NPM.

Principle 1: Measure for social, economic and environmental outcomes

What do we mean?

Our analysis assumes that public policy aims to create a fairer and sustainable society. Although this will vary in meaning across time and between groups, there will always be a theory of some sort of progress underpinning policy. The role of measurement is to create the evidence needed to evaluate success in the pursuit of societal goals.

Measures should provide information that improves our understanding of the relationship between specific interventions and the well-being of individuals, communities and the environment. Measures should be focused on outcomes: how lives, communities or the environment change as a result of policy. Changes can be both positive and negative, and both should be accounted for. The time allowed for evaluation needs to reflect the fact that some changes take decades. We also need to allow for the fact that many interventions are contingent on other interventions, so it is important to try to map the impact of a variety of factors.

What would this involve?

Developing indicators that capture outcomes will require a new approach to measurement and evaluation. Rather than focusing solely on what is timely, tangible and easily quantifiable, decision-makers must also be aware of and sensitive to the uncertain shape and pace of change. The content of indicators needs to be linked to social, economic and environmental outcomes, however difficult these are to measure, so allowances have to be made for differing degrees of uncertainty. Indicators should also be built around a theory of change so that the journey towards desired outcomes can be appraised at various stages along the way.

It is crucial that those people affected by or involved in an activity should also take part in identifying relevant outcomes and indicators (see *Principle 2*). An SROI process that engages stakeholders in this way will be able to adapt and renew its measures as new information comes to light.

It is also important to measure outcomes over a sustained period of time. This will mean that the data collected can be used to construct a 'moving picture' of the distance travelled – be that for subjective or objective dimensions of change, for individuals and communities or for the environment. Better indicators of distance travelled, or of short-term outcomes, will reduce our reliance on output measures, which are usually not in themselves a measure of change.[8]

Because individual measures are only able to give us a partial picture, different indicators need to be looked at in relation to one another. To extend the pictorial analogy, individual measures need to be combined like pixels or mosaic tiles to give a more complete impression of the overall state of a society and/or its environment. This kind of rounded view is essential if we are to spot gaps in information and identify what additional measures are needed to fill those gaps.

Understanding measures in terms of a larger whole is important in two other ways. Firstly, it is crucial if we are to avoid inflating the importance of any one indicator (as happens notoriously with GDP, which has had the effect of obscuring and indeed working against other important objectives). Secondly, it allows us to better understand and balance trade-offs between social, economic and environmental goals. All policy decisions involve trade-offs, and if we have the right measures these will make our choices explicit. Difficult decisions will still have to be made but they will be strengthened by better information.

Box 1: Outputs alone fail to measure change

There are a number of criminal justice indicators that measure outputs rather than outcomes, such as the percentage of prison drug treatment programmes completed and the number of prisoners signing voluntary drug-testing compacts. An example of an outcome-based measure that could be deployed instead is the number of prisoners who become and remain drug-free. Measures of distance travelled would be required along the journey towards becoming drug-free, such as reduced harm to the individual and others.

Many of the targets that local authorities report on in relation to children in care are outputs, such as attendance at GP appointments and health checks. There is much anecdotal evidence that these have created perverse incentives – with councils losing stars as a result of decisions that they thought were in the interests of the child. *Care Matters* went some way towards addressing this, including an intention to measure emotional and mental health outcomes. But there is still a lack of a comprehensive, systematic approach to measuring and collating outcomes. In the absence of information on outcomes, the service is susceptible to the cost of placement – which tells us so little about the quality or effectiveness of care – becoming too significant a factor in decision-making.

In economic development there has also been an over-emphasis on measuring outputs – such as job creation – without looking at whether the jobs created actually benefited economically inactive people, or deprived areas. The Local Enterprise Growth Initiative went some way towards a more outcomes-based approach by specifying the change that it wants to see and allowing local authorities to develop their own targets. However, our evidence suggests that the delivery is still very focused on outputs.

This is partly because a culture of output measurement is ingrained in public services that have been delivering to targets for decades. Not enough is being done to empower delivery agents to innovate in their approach to measurement. For example, official evaluations are overly concerned with success at a project level and are more concerned with delivery of processes in the short-term than in looking for evidence of outcomes.

What does this mean for policy-makers?

Policy-makers need to set measures that clearly relate to outcomes, so that they are able to gather the evidence required to evaluate whether policy is achieving its stated goals.

Many of the structures of government actively work against this approach: budget and spending cycles, departmental silos, political cycles, centralised decision-making among them. To make matters worse efficiency drives of recent times have undermined what should be a laudable concept and desirable goal; instead debate on efficiency has been forced back to the level of inputs, with real implications for service quality.

If government is to put things in terms of outcomes, it will need to take the plunge and make what's important measurable rather than contenting itself with making what's measurable important. Efficiency needs to be redefined to be about the relationship between investment and outcomes, rather than the relationship between investment and outputs.[9]

If the new measures that we are advocating are to provide more than a snapshot of outcomes, data will need to be collected painstakingly over time. This is already the case with some macro-indicators but has yet to be extended down to the level of the individual (see Box 1). Where data is collected over time, shorter-term monitoring and evaluation data have prompted the scrapping of some programmes before they have had sufficient time to take root (see Box 1). Policy-makers must therefore strike a balance between giving sufficient weight to future outcomes and being alert to the distorting potential of existing measures.

Principle 2: Measure *with* people

What do we mean?
The people who are closest to or most affected by an activity are uniquely positioned to identify its effects, whether positive or negative. They should therefore be involved as deeply as possible when creating and revising indicators. Without this input, measurement is unlikely to capture what really matters to people.

What would this involve?
To fully harness people's knowledge and experience of their own personal and social circumstances, we need to put the recipients of public services at the heart of measurement systems. This has at least two important implications. Firstly, key stakeholders – such as those that use and deliver services – should be engaged when setting specific measures and targets. This will help to ensure that measures capture relevant outcomes. Secondly, these same stakeholders should be consulted after a programme's implementation. This will allow its lived effects to feed back into the measure-setting process and enable analysts to refine individual indicators if necessary.

Of course consultation takes place at all levels of government. But what we are advocating is more than consultation: it is akin to 'co-producing' services with stakeholders.[10] To be successful this approach needs to be an integral and sustained part of the process, rather than an element that is added on to 'tick a box' for engaging with civil society.

It is important to avoid the kind of 'consultation fatigue' that has developed in the care sector, where children's views are sought regularly but not necessarily reflected in subsequent policy. Where consultation and measurement are discreet processes separated out from the delivery of services, the opportunity to engage people as a matter of course is missed. Building engagement into the measurement process joins them up, creates more meaningful and relevant indicators, minimises the likelihood of unintended consequences and rebalances the power in priority setting.

What does this mean for policy-makers?
Measuring with people will require new systems and processes that are more participative. Priorities would be set in conjunction with relevant groups and progress reported back to them. Government must therefore seek to open up the terrain of measurement to as many of the relevant stakeholders as possible. This does not mean blindly following public opinion, or supporting populist policies; the goal is for policy to be 'stakeholder informed', which places the views of stakeholders alongside other sources of evidence and decision-making criteria. It also requires taking leadership on informing the public of the real costs and benefits of decisions.

In order to do this, policy-makers will need to be more ambitious in the way that they conceive of collaboration. As it stands, the principle of collaboration enjoys wide support in government: cross-departmental task forces are now an established mode of policy-making. The emergent 'personalisation' agenda is seeking to extend this beyond the confines of the state by allowing users and frontline workers to shape the very nature of public services. But without measurement of the right things, government will be unable to identify the effects of this experiment with user-led design. Given the variety of practices that such an approach to public services can be expected to produce, measurement itself must become more fluid if it is to tell us what we need to know.

Box 2A: When indicators drive policy, rather than the other way around

The current offender assessment system focuses principally on how factors such as drug use and family relationships affect an individual's risk of reoffending. An alternative system would recognise that for women, offending often results from problems in other aspects of their lives, and therefore that dealing with those more fundamental issues (e.g. drug use, relationships with others) would be more effective than focusing on their offending behaviour. In the current system, the offending rate can end up driving how government deals with offenders, when it should be just one part of a bigger picture that looks in the round at what 'works' in addressing the root causes of women offenders' problems.

Box 2B: Missing what matters

In the case of looked-after children, the indicators reflect national priorities for education and employment rather than what matters to young people themselves. Throughout a young person's life there are a range of important stages of development that are ignored. What parents, for example, would only take a snapshot of their children's development at ages 16 and 19?

In our research with looked-after children the consistent message about what was important was how they felt about themselves and the quality and longevity of their relationships. Yet these priorities are not reflected in official indicators of the quality of care. It is not in question that education is protective for young people, but children told us that they did not want to be judged solely on their educational attainment. This made sense because although many were unlikely to get high grades in school, this did not mean they would not excel elsewhere.

One of the care homes that participated in the research has had great success in getting its young people, against all odds, to sit exams. Although these young people generally achieve poor exam results, they find that just sitting the exams represents such a positive experience that it should be regarded as a real measure of success for their particular care home to get them to that point. Those taking the exams learn all sorts of skills simply by participating.

This does not meet any government targets, of course, so it is not valued by government. This highlights the problem with a single-stakeholder approach to measuring value; one that favours what government is looking for rather than what is valued by the users of public services.

Box 2C: When policy is about counting things, rather than changing lives

The evaluation of Local Economic Growth Initiatives (LEGIs) has been based on enterprise and employment data. These are clearly important, but they do not capture all the dimensions of local regeneration – such as the quality of jobs available, access to local services, levels of crime and quality of life. In our study of one LEGI, we spoke to a wide range of the programme's stakeholders – including new business owners; new employees; new and existing enterprises; residents; LEGI delivery partners; and the unemployed. These discussions indicated that such outcomes are very important to people. Among residents and the unemployed, we found not only that paid work has a great impact on people's lives, but also that sustainable and meaningful employment was valued more than income. Local services were viewed as important to the health of the community.

Those delivering services should be encouraged to pay heed to this wider range of benefits. After all, it could be argued that local economic development is only successful if real measurable benefits flow to local people, irrespective of how many new jobs and enterprises are created.

Principle 3: Value the things that matter most

What do we mean?

Measuring and valuing the intangible things in life is challenging. People can be hostile to it because they find it reductive; these things are the stuff of life, after all, and may seem too important to be assessed and tallied in this way. And yet it is because of this very importance that we need to find ways to grasp them and bring them into the frame of what we loosely call evidence. How else can we gain recognition for the relative importance of outcomes and give them greater prominence in the measurement and development of policy?

It is only by making outcomes visible and assessing them on the same terms as traditional economic indicators that we can ensure that they are not squeezed out. Finding ways to quantify, value and account for negative outcomes is equally important, not just to get a fuller picture of the returns on investment but also to incentivise organisations to minimise them.

What would this involve?

Economists have for decades sought ways to value non-market traded goods and services. There is a long history in environmental economics but there are other examples. Health economists use quality-of-life-adjusted years to make decisions about drugs. Investment decisions in international development are often based on analyses that put a value on life. These are not without controversy and often raise important ethical questions. SROI is a blend of social and economic approaches and brings techniques that can improve traditional economic valuation and extend the discipline of economic measurement to the social and environmental fields.

All the prices that we use are approximations: 'proxies' for the value that the buyer and seller gain and lose in the transaction. Taking this approach involves accepting that all value is subjective – even that negotiated in the market by the supposedly objective forces of scarcity and demand. Recent times have furnished us with some extreme examples of this, whether it is the gross over-valuation of derivatives products, or the collapse of the property market. Nobody would argue that homeowners value their property any less than they did a year ago, irrespective of a 20 per cent drop in price.

Adam Smith wrote about this in *The Wealth of Nations*: '[Value] is adjusted...not by any accurate measure, but by the higgling and bargaining of the market, according to that sort of rough equality which, though not exact, is sufficient for carrying on the business of common life.' The point that Smith makes is directly relevant here; exactitude evades us but markets allow us to carry on with the business of life. Keynes made the same argument later when he counseled towards being 'vaguely right, rather than precisely wrong'. This programme is about bringing all of the intangibles onto the balance sheet so that we can make better decisions.

What does this mean for policy-makers?

A distinctive aspect of SROI compared to other valuation methods is that it calculates costs and benefits to many stakeholders. For example, it recognises that an intervention that reduces reoffending benefits victims, offenders and their families, and also society generally and the Exchequer. Counting the benefit to all of these individual, groups and interests is not duplication. In the same way that there are multiple indicators of value that go beyond financial costs and benefits, there are other beneficiaries of value creation besides the state.

The state is not an entity detached from those that resource and mandate it; its purpose should be to generate the maximum public benefit with the resources available. SROI allows us to accurately assess the extent to which this is achieved. An SROI approach will also value the costs to the individual of multiple types of disadvantage, the logic being that having a drug problem and a criminal record is more costly to the individual – and to society more broadly – than a drug problem alone.

Box 3: Financial proxies

A number of different techniques were used across the Measuring What Matters programme. In economic development we put a value on access to local shops and services by calculating the amount that people would have to spend in time and travel costs to access similar services elsewhere. Another option to capture this value might be to look at the premium that people would be prepared to pay to shop locally.

For the value of mental health to children later in life from poor care outcomes we calculated the value of the time lost due to ill-health each year per capita based on the average industrial wage. The value to parents of being able to spend time with their children was based on the proportion of their income that people spend on their children each year. The logic of this was that the reason people have children in the first place was to spend time with them, which meant the cost of supporting them was a reasonable proxy.

We used rent prices to place a value on women being able to retain their homes, rather than go to prison. To evaluate the benefit of reduced drug we used the amount that problematic drug users spend on drugs each year. For indebtedness we calculated the APR that women were likely to have to pay to service their debts while in prison.

These measures are imperfect, not least where they are linked to market valuations that will fluctuate far more than their 'intrinsic' value. But this is equally true of financial asset prices (such as stock market valuations), which are significantly more volatile than the real economic 'value' creation of the underlying entity. What is clear is that a range of crucial positive and negative outcomes are being made visible through the generation and evolution of these proxies. To focus solely on the merits of individual proxies would be to miss the point of Measuring What Matters, which is to shine a light on that which is important.

SROI uses financial proxies to value things that are not market-traded. In the same way that income is often a proxy for the value of a job, as opposed to an exact measure of it, proxies can be generated to value and account for other outcomes. There are various techniques for how these are arrived at, including seeking subjective views, looking for related goods close to the outcome that are market traded, and analysing data on spending patterns. Box 3 above gives examples of how this was done for each of the strands of work.

Extending the notion of value is long overdue but it will not be easy to achieve. It means recognising that public policy can destroy as well as create value. Tackling the social, environmental and economic problems that we currently face will require ambitious reforms. We need to find ways to incentivise the creation of positive outcomes, which will always be undersupplied by the private sector where economic actors cannot directly profit from their production.

In the public sphere, in contrast, the prevention of public 'bads' and the creation of public goods should be at the heart of policy and practice. Too often, however, the approach we see is not symmetrical: it needs to be about more than removing 'bads', or even preventing them from occurring. There needs to be an incentive to create *real* positive value.

Building this into the core business of public and private institutions as a matter of course will not be possible, unless we find ways to measure and aggregate it, and compare it to other kinds of value creation. That is, if we want to encourage the creation of positive outcomes we need to incentivise and equip the private, public and third sectors to successfully pursue these goals. Established examples of this approach include the Fairtrade movement, which has attempted to factor the real costs of acceptable labour standards into the pricing system – in other words, to be explicit about the real costs of producing positive outcomes. In the public sector we need to create a 'race to the top' in which agencies strive to outdo each other in terms of the production of positive outcomes, rather than a race to the bottom where competition focuses on the narrow and distorting area of unit cost.

Principle 4: Be responsive

What do we mean?

It is hard to make good decisions if there is a poor evidence base to inform decision-making. The purpose of measurement is to generate the evidence needed to improve practice, and decision-makers must therefore be willing and able to learn from past experience. Good measurement requires time, resources and expertise and should not be undertaken for its own sake. In order for this to happen, interventions at all levels need to have an adaptive capacity, without which measurement is a rather fruitless enterprise.

What would this involve?

Putting evidence to good use means strengthening the links between specific indicators, the information they capture and the substantive decisions that result. Practically speaking, decision-makers need to recognise that value is defined by many stakeholders and should start piloting new methods of evaluation such as SROI. This will mean recognising that objectivity is a false god and as such the emphasis on external evaluation and monitoring should be reconsidered.

This has two important implications. Firstly, data must be gathered in a systematic way: measurement should be embedded into the management systems of prisons, care homes, schools and other public institutions and inform practice on a rolling basis. Secondly, a culture of openness and learning must be cultivated among decision-makers: existing measurement data can only inform practice when norms and processes permit.

A dialogue with stakeholders is only useful if public servants are capable of responding to it. Funnelling information back to the centre and using it to command and control defeats the purpose of measurement, which should be to learn and improve – and shape services accordingly.

What does this mean for policy-makers?

Policy-makers need to rethink how they use the measurement information they have at their disposal. They need to ask themselves whether it is really helping to improve the effectiveness of their policies, or some other purpose – political expediency or risk minimisation, for example.

As a first step, government needs to create a formal loop between the data it collects and the decisions it makes. It should not only be explicit about what it measures (and why – see *Principle 6*); it should also report on the role that measurement information has played in the policy-making process.

A truly effective feedback loop, however, will require that government learns how to learn. The culture of policy-making must be such that specific departments and task forces are able to adjust their strategies in light of the information that good measures can provide.

Box 4A: Sentencing needs to adapt to new information about the effects of imprisonment on outcomes for women

The number of women sentenced to custody keeps increasing despite evidence that prison does not work on a number of counts – for example, on reoffending and rehabilitation. The lessons are not being learned. This applies to prolific non-violent offenders generally. There is no proven link between crime rates and rates of imprisonment and no conclusive evidence that incarceration changes the behaviour of persistent offenders. Other research suggests that prison offers no more of a deterrent than community–based sanctions, and this has been validated by 2008 research on those serving short sentences. Yet the UK continues to lock up more and more people. This is an area where politicians' perceptions of public opinion, rather than evidence, are hugely influential.

Box 4B: Regeneration policy lacks key types of data and has failed to learn from those that do exist

The Local Enterprise Growth Initiative was launched in 2005 with much fanfare. It was an innovative approach that would learn from previous policy failures by giving more control to local authorities. Two years later a ministerial shuffle brought about a change in policy direction, no further rounds were announced and the future of the existing LEGIs hung in the balance. This led to job insecurity among staff and worked against the long-term approach that LEGI was meant to be piloting. An assessment that would affect many lives was made before the evaluations were completed, another example of politics trumping evidence in decision-making.

More broadly, regeneration policy continues to display inflexibility and inertia in the face of new evidence. This is demonstrated in the focus on promoting start-up enterprises, despite a lack of evidence that this is any more effective in improving the economic position of deprived local economies than encouraging the growth of existing businesses. Of course starting businesses is important, and our research suggests that self-employment is more highly valued than being an employee, but this is only one aspect of what constitutes a healthy local economy. Maintaining existing enterprises, especially where they represent essential services, is also important. However, measuring and demonstrating that your initiative has helped to maintain services is harder than demonstrating that you have helped start them, and this is part of the reason why an obsession with new starts persists.

Furthermore, this area has yet to address a crippling lack of high-quality and timely data. Data on VAT registrations, for example, are only published biannually – and with a one-year time-lag. This makes project monitoring extremely difficult and forces measurement to focus on successful process completion.

Principle 5: Avoid over-claiming

What do we mean?

The purpose of measurement is to pinpoint those activities or interventions that succeed in bringing about desired outcomes. Measures must therefore be used to estimate what *difference* a specific intervention has made over and above what would have happened anyway.

This is undoubtedly difficult because we cannot recreate controlled scientific conditions in most social and economic contexts. However, we can make better use of existing benchmark data and invest in understanding and generating better control information. One example crystallises why this is important; after decades of public spending on regeneration initiatives spatial inequality is wider now than it has been since urban policy first emerged. This is in spite of successive interventions reporting positive results.

This is a failure of measurement on a number of fronts. But an apparent inability to take account of a wide spectrum of socio-economic consequences or to allow for the impacts of wider macro-economic trends is central. While governments have been spending and measuring and then spending some more, they are often no wiser about which elements of policy work best and why. This is not just a waste of money but a wasted opportunity to learn how to address a range of complex societal problems.

What would this involve?

In order to establish the true impact of an intervention, decision-makers need to put the outcomes in their broader context. Those other factors that could have contributed to the change observed must be recognised, measured and used to construct a picture of what would have happened in the absence of intervention, which benefits have been displaced from elsewhere, and any unintended negative consequences. This will allow evaluation to aim at identifying those impacts that are directly attributable to the intervention in question, and additional to positive change being created by other actors.

What does this mean for policy-makers?

Policy-makers need to factor into their measurement systems the ability to establish and isolate the effects of individual policy interventions. This is likely to require setting a baseline against which data collected later in the process, or post-intervention, can be measured.

Policy-makers also need to identify and specify additional influences upon a policy's implementation so that deadweight and displacement effects can be accounted for. This should include recognising that there is often more than one driver of change, and account should be taken of the extent to which effects are attributable to the policy. Interventions can lead to negative or unintended consequences, of course, and these should also be accounted for and deducted from the overall value.

Box 5A: More data is needed to assess the effectiveness of public investment in regeneration

In the evaluation of regeneration programmes, not enough care is being taken to ensure that observed changes can be attributed to public investment. Local economies are changing all the time, as people start new businesses, learn new skills and find new employment. With so much going on and so many public and voluntary agencies involved in deprived areas, appropriate benchmarks are needed to measure the extent to which public investment plays a part in any improvements achieved. LEGI has recognised this in its government-funded national evaluation. It has used the same four categories of benchmarks for each LEGI area being evaluated, ensuring that they can be meaningfully compared. This is the only way that interventions can know if the changes observed are truly additional.

Box 5B: The need for baselines and benchmarks

Outcomes for children in care tend to be compared to outcomes among the general population, a measure on which they tend to fall short. While making comparisons with the general population shows commendable ambition, it makes it very difficult to assess the real impact of the care intervention. A more revealing and meaningful benchmark is to look at what would have happened if those children hadn't been taken into care. Against this benchmark the local authority may actually be seen to have performed well, even if the child doesn't do well in school. One study compared the long-term educational performance of children in care with other 'in difficulty' groups with no history of accommodation in public care. It found that they had actually performed better. If we are to make comparisons such as this effectively over time, then there will be a need to track young people until the age of 25+.

Another useful benchmark would be to look at what was happening before children came into care, and whether there has been a relative improvement in their lives. Collecting proper baseline data when children enter care would enable the measurement of distance travelled. This is challenging because young people move in and out of care. But it is also very important because local authorities cannot be expected to repair years of abuse, or neglect, overnight. That prior experience matters is evidenced by the fact that children tend to fare worse if they come into care at a more advanced age.

Principle 6: Transparency and accountability should inform everything

What do we mean?

Truly democratic policy-making requires that citizens can hold those responsible for the goals and objectives of policy to account. What gets measured is what counts, and so the choice of what to measure is not neutral. The process of setting measures and targets must therefore include an explicit acknowledgement of the priorities and values that they embody.

The processes that government uses to set measures are overwhelmingly opaque. It is not usually obvious who has been involved in key decisions, or whether the views of all relevant stakeholders have been taken on board. Likewise, it is not clear how decision-makers have balanced different priorities, and whether or not the process for doing so has given fair consideration to all relevant points of view. The new indicators and new approach that we are advocating need to be introduced and implemented in a transparent and accountable way if the negative culture around project evaluation and target setting in the public sector is to be overcome.

What would this involve?

Being transparent about the values that animate measurement means explaining how key decisions are made. There are two sides to this. Firstly, the criteria used to select one indicator over another must be *identified*. What, for example, is the relative weight of practical considerations – such as the ease with which a certain type of data can be collected – and the objectives of stakeholders? Where indicators are not developed but are held by stakeholders to capture important outcomes, this must be clearly stated; and where certain factors are excluded from the analysis entirely, this must be admitted.

Secondly, the criteria used in such an analysis must be *justified*. Why is it, for example, that in a certain context stakeholder views are decisive and in others they are not? Are stakeholder views decisive when they chime with the pre-existing views of those designing and implementing policy? Do the views and priorities hold the same weight in economic development policy, and what is the point of these policies if they do not? Being clear in these ways will help to bring priorities and values to the surface and allow them to be interrogated by those on the receiving end of policy.

What does this mean for policy-makers?

Accountability means giving account of performance but it also means being held to account by society'. Measuring with people means transferring power to those that are affected (see *Principle 2*). In practice there are few mechanisms whereby users of services can hold governments to account. Why, for example, do consultants not report directly to unemployed people about how regeneration funding was spent in their area, or to victims and offenders on reoffending rates?

'Measuring with people' means acknowledging a wide range of expertise and valuing subjective experiences. Under this system, the fact that older people report to like a type of care intervention should feature highly in the decision to retain it, alongside other information such as its relative cost and evidence of its effectiveness.

The public policy compass should be set in accordance with democratic principles. Decision-makers must therefore be explicit from the outset about the values that underpin indicators. They must also develop participative systems of measurement that will allow those values to be contested. This will require a certain degree of reflexivity (see *Principle 4*). Firstly, they must seek to understand how they make decisions on what to measure. Secondly, they must be clear about how stakeholders have been involved in this process. And finally, they must close the loop by incorporating the views of stakeholders into

Box 6A: Offender rehabilitation targets are not accountable to individual offenders

Measures relating to offender rehabilitation cover the types of help and support offenders need to get their lives back on track, such as the numbers of prisoners with accommodation on release or those able to access drug treatment programmes. The targets are likely to provide useful data to policy-makers deciding on the relative merits of different rehabilitation initiatives. It is unclear, however, how these targets help individual offenders that are not able to get housing or get a place on a drug treatment programme, or other support they might need. What they lack is a direct accountability link between the target and the lived reality of an individual offender.

Box 6B: Cost-benefit analysis needs to be more transparent

Transparency should extend to valuation in any economic appraisal. This would mean being explicit about every cost and proxy used, so that others can follow and understand the analysis. While this may be contained in guidance on cost-benefit analysis, it is not an aspect that is usually followed. Throughout this research information on costs was difficult to obtain. Although government departments invest in research on costs that relate to their areas, they are rarely explicit in how these are calculated. Sometimes these are only presented in the aggregate without any audit trail. As well as being opaque they are relatively incomprehensible in this form, which obscures rather than informs the issue.

the process of measure-setting. Within such a system, the process for determining relevance would clearly identify and justify the criteria used; meanwhile, the process for determining importance would establish and justify the basis for determining past, present or likely future occurrence and the severity of impact.

Principle 7: Measure strengths as well as risks and deficits

What do we mean?

Understanding the positive factors that enable society to improve is just as important as understanding where and how things go wrong. Measurement needs to reflect this so that effective and empowering solutions can be developed where appropriate. If a system over-emphasises failure, then it may crowd out other considerations. It is then very difficult to build up an understanding of why some people in that system succeed and to adapt services accordingly. In addition, the act of measuring something means it is prioritised and resourced; focusing on deficits alone means excluding actions that might lead to successful outcomes.

In a society that has become increasingly individualised, people that are less likely to be 'at risk' increasingly prefer to 'go it alone' rather than pool risks with those they see as more likely to need help. This can also be observed in public life, where a fear of litigation and public exposure – where people increasingly seek individual redress for real or perceived 'wrongs' – has led to an approach to public services that is intrinsically risk averse. The problem is particularly acute in children's services, where attempts to protect a few from appalling harm may lead to lesser amounts of harm being caused to many.

One response to this has been to assign specific responsibility by setting achievable, measurable targets that are attributable to individuals – invariably outputs rather than outcomes. Measures that were intended to protect service users have thus become increasingly employed to protect public servants. Paradoxically, this has not led to higher staff performance: boxes get ticked, output targets may be hit, but nobody is held to account for outcomes not being achieved.

What would this involve?

Measuring positive factors demands thinking about what contributes to the success of an individual or a community. Although this is variable and ultimately rests on the particularities of a specific issue and its broader context, there is a general need to complement existing measures of what people lack with a stronger focus on their capacities. Positive indicators of this sort are needed if we are to improve our ability to develop innovative and holistic policy. It is often assumed that success is simply the absence of failure, but measuring success might involve measuring a whole range of different things.

This means risk and failure need to be put in perspective; recognising that there can be no innovation and learning without some degree of failure (see *Principle 4*). Failure is also a fluid concept – can an initiative that does not achieve the intended outcomes be considered a failure if lessons are learned and acted upon?

What does this mean for policy-makers?

Policy-makers need to develop indicators and measurement systems that will allow them to make assessments of an individual's assets, strengths and opportunities. They must also focus on how policy or public service provision could enable and encourage people to succeed. They will need to work with people not only in developing and refining individual indicators (see *Principle 2*) but also in identifying what positive factors need to be considered.

We also want to see a re-examination of how risks are managed, particularly in services for vulnerable people. Within this system a way would need to be found to appraise against outcomes, and to share successes and failures, not least with users themselves.

Box 7A: Criminal Justice measures over-emphasise risk and failure

Much criminal justice policy is geared towards minimising the threat that offenders and ex-offenders pose to the public. This means that criminal justice targets and indicators are inordinately concerned with reducing the risk of reoffending. Probation officers we spoke to in the course of our research reported that they are formally required to focus on prolific and high-risk offenders. In practice this means they have very little time to deal with the rehabilitative needs of other offenders (including female offenders, since women are generally neither prolific nor high-risk offenders).

The government's primary concern with reoffending means that measures reflect where policy has failed, rather than where it has succeeded in enabling individuals to build fulfilling and law-abiding lives. A shift in emphasis to focus on success may help identify the interventions that are likely to be the most effective at enabling individuals to go and stay 'straight'. For example, family support might be a potential asset that a woman can draw upon but if her key worker is not encouraged to consider it then it may be ignored.

A good example of this comes from our qualitative research. Women interviewed noted that during their support – focused community sentences, self-confidence increased and they felt more autonomous and in control of their lives. These things were important to them – they believed that confidence and a sense of autonomy could be valuable in laying a foundation for rebuilding their lives in the future. They indicated these were the first steps on a road to dealing with their debts, poor relationships, drug use etc.

As well as being positive factors in their own right, the presence of such conditions may lead to future savings for everyone through reductions in crime.

Box 7B: Young people's strengths are not captured by the indicators used to make care decisions

Children in care are five times more likely to be allocated to special schools, even when their disabilities are less serious than those of other children in mainstream schooling. Research has found that social workers and carers often have low expectations of what children can achieve educationally, with the result that social workers are reluctant to set what they see as unrealistic goals.

This was confirmed by our research, where carers were three times more likely to report negatively about the well-being of the children they cared for than the children themselves. An example of how we shifted the emphasis to the positive in this research was in exploring the elements of what constituted a young person's safety, rather than the risk of reoffending. Contact with the criminal justice system is of course part of this, but there are other factors such as ability to ask for help or to recognise risk. These are important and could help build a young person's resilience.

Measuring the wrong things has a real impact on people's lives. In our research young people told us that throughout the care system they felt that their lives were dominated by policies and procedures, which created feelings of institutionalisation which contrasted with the elements that young people identified as characterising a pleasant home – a sense of 'normality' and homeliness.

Conclusion

Many of the findings of the Measuring What Matters programme should be plain common sense.

Women offenders want to keep their homes, and if they do so they are less likely to add to the long list of people in need of social housing provision. Investment in economic regeneration is of limited value to people in deprived areas if it creates jobs but fails to help protect and enhance the local services that turn an estate into a community. Children in care are more likely to flourish if their care homes offer engaging activities and an environment that evokes a family setting rather than an institutional one.

The sad truth about public service provision in the UK is that this kind of common sense is too often obscured by financial expediency. The needs and aspirations of those on the receiving end of government economic and social programmes are being neglected in a cost-conscious culture that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Success is being judged on the basis of a narrow set of outputs that are relatively easy to measure, instead of weighing what really works for individuals – and what delivers lasting benefits to communities.

Measuring What Matters has looked at just three aspects of public service spending – economic regeneration of disadvantaged areas, rehabilitation of women offenders and children's residential care. These areas have in common a history of failed policy intervention, characterised by widening economic equalities, persistent reoffending among women convicted of minor offences, and consistently poor educational attainment by looked-after children. Our research found, however, that if you look closely you will find progressive projects that have the potential to make progress against the odds – if policy-makers are prepared to learn from their experience and build upon it.

There is nothing wrong with having targets to focus minds and help evaluate effectiveness. The problem is that time and again the targets chosen in the public sector have been narrowly output-focused, conspicuously failing to measure and value the outcomes that matter to people's lives and livelihoods. What is needed is a concerted effort to measure what is really important instead of vesting undue importance in what is straightforwardly measurable. And that will need not just new measurement mechanisms but a whole new management culture.

We hope that the principles we have outlined in this paper, coupled with the wealth of practical insights and examples from the three more detailed reports that encapsulate our research, will encourage policy-makers to rethink their priorities – and revolutionise their approach.

Endnotes

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9 See **nef**'s sustainable commissioning model; Ryan-Collins J, Sanfillippo L and Spratt S (2002) *Unintended Consequences: How the efficiency agenda erodes local public services, and a new public benefit model to restore them* (London: **nef**).

10 The concept of co-production aims to encourage greater use of people's skills and experience to help deliver public and voluntary services, thereby blurring the boundaries between professionals and service users. For more information see Stephens L, Ryan Collins J and Boyle D (2008) *Co-production: a manifesto for growing the core economy* (London: **nef**).

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