

DESIGNING THEORETICALLY AND EVIDENCE-BASED SOCIAL PROCUREMENT PROGRAMMES IN CONSTRUCTION: A CAPABILITY EMPOWERMENT APPROACH

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Social procurement policies require companies to develop and implement initiatives to create social value, yet many programmes created in response to these emerging policies lack a reliable empirical and theoretical foundation. Addressing this problem and bringing a new theoretically informed evidence-based approach to social procurement research in construction, this paper presents a theoretically informed and methodologically robust social return on investment (SROI) analysis of a construction training programme developed to reduce the risk of youth homelessness. Mobilising Sen and Nussbaum's Capability Empowerment Approach, the paper provides robust, testable and transparent evidence of the social impact of the programme on the lives of the homeless people who went through it. Robust theoretically informed social procurement initiatives are critically important in ensuring that social procurement policies have their intended social outcomes.

Keywords: social procurement; theory of change; SROI; employment; youth

INTRODUCTION

Recent research into the growing use of social procurement in construction has argued that there needs to be further empirical exploration of social procurement as it is under theorised and conceptualised (Troje and Andersson 2020). As these policies continue to evolve in countries such as the UK, Sweden, Australia, Canada and South Africa, there have also been calls for more research into the measurement of social procurement policy outcomes (Watts *et al.*, 2019). However, social value measurement methodologies remain contested and theoretically unsound (Raiden *et al.*, 2019). One potentially valuable theory, which could be employed to conceptualise the social value created by social procurement initiatives, is Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities empowerment approach. This is founded on the idea that there is a threshold level of capability across a number of dimensions, which need to be achieved to enable people to meet their full potential as members of society. Notably, Nussbaum (2000) also explains that the capability empowerment approach could be used with cost benefit analysis (CBA) as long as it is acknowledged that one capability is not prioritised over the next. The increasingly popular social return on

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investment (SROI) approach is based on the principles of CBA and works by assigning monetary values to social and economic returns (Rotheroe and Richards, 2007). The aim of this paper is to address the lack of theory and rigorous measurement in the context of social procurement by examining whether the capabilities empowerment approach can be used as a theoretical basis to underpin the measurement of the social value. Using a case study of an intermediate employment programme created to help young people at risk of homelessness to find work in construction, this paper contributes to the advancement of research into social procurement practice and social value measurement in the field of construction management.

Measuring social value using a capabilities empowerment approach

In measuring the impact of social procurement initiatives, SROI is increasingly used (Watts *et al.*, 2019). SROI is a framework for measuring and reporting on the social, economic and environmental value created by a policy, programme or intervention (Nicholls *et al.*, 2012). Based on traditional economic evaluation including CBA and accounting the SROI methodology provides a holistic framework to include wider social impact based on strong engagement with stakeholders (Gosselin *et al.*, 2020, Rotheroe and Richards, 2007). SROI is a metric used to quantify the impact an organisation generates per unit of currency (£1) invested. In order to determine the SROI, organisations assign a monetary value to economic, social and environmental outcomes produced over a specified period. A ratio of 1: 2 would indicate for every £1 invested in a programme there was £2 of wider social value creation. There have been examples of the SROI methodology being used in construction. For example, Watson *et al.* (2016) used SROI to capture the social value of buildings created for end users. Watson and Whitley (2016) suggest SROI is a well-developed method with significant potential to gather feedback from the end users of buildings and a way of communicating this value in an effective way.

Criticism of the approach tends to focus on the technical and instrumental challenges of SROI and its weak theoretical basis (Krlev *et al.*, 2013, Raiden *et al.*, 2019). Fujiwara (2015) also argues that in contrast to more established cost benefit analysis methodologies which have a strong foundation in ethics, the guidance on SROI does not provide a principled normative account of 'the good' (Fujiwara, 2015). Fujiwara (2015) suggests without a moral account of 'the good' valuation methods can be ad-hoc with the weights and values applied being subjective and haphazard with the outcome of SROI having little value. However, as Watson and Whitley (2016) note, SROI is not just about a single financial ratio it is a framework that gathers qualitative data with the potential to communicate value in an effective way.

The implementation of SROI methodologies in research is relatively rare because SROI methodologies have emerged from practice, and as such there is limited peer-reviewed literature on the subject and a lack of theoretical underpinning (Krlev *et al.*, 2013). While the SROI methodology does emphasise the importance of a 'theory of change' to represent all the steps needed for a programme to reach its intended outcomes (Nicholls *et al.*, 2012), SROI practitioners are not required to justify the theoretical foundations of the inherent causal mechanisms in the 'theory of change' that lead to the desired outcome. Therefore, while a theory of change is seen as crucial for an effective social impact assessment, they are in reality rarely theoretically informed. Arvidson *et al.* (2010) and Raiden *et al.* (2019) recognised that this is a fundamental weakness of the SROI approach and that more research is needed in order to understand how SROI can be used to understand change in order to improve

the rigour, robustness and reliability of claims about the social value of social programme interventions. Without a sound theoretical foundation, claims about the social impact of programmes implemented in response to social procurement policies in construction cannot be made with any legitimacy because the causal links between inputs, outputs and outcomes cannot be empirically supported.

In addressing this problem, the capabilities empowerment approach is a potentially valuable conceptual framework because it conceptualises the types of social problems targeted by social procurement policies (such as homelessness) as a form of 'capability-deprivation' (Kimhur, 2020). Kimhur (2020) suggests Nussbaum's list provides a good philosophical grounded framework that keeps open a flexible space for defining specific contextual central capabilities. The capabilities approach argues that these capability deprivations are often the result of relative deficiencies in opportunities and resources available to people who suffer them, rather than any innate fault of their own. It is an especially useful framework because it presents a codified list of central capabilities which people need to develop in order to mitigate the risks of these types of problems. These include: Life (living a life of a normal length and having a life that is worth living); Bodily health (having good health, adequate nourishment and adequate shelter); Bodily integrity (freedom of movement and autonomy over bodily boundaries); Senses, imagination and thought (being able to think, imagine and reason); Emotions (being able to have attachments to things and people). Practical reason (participating in the planning and managing of one's own life); Affiliation (the development of self-esteem and dignity through relationships); Other species (having concern for nature); Play (the ability to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities); and Control over one's environment (having the right to seek employment on an equal basis to others and having the freedom to control one's life (Nussbaum, 2000).

METHOD

Data was collected within a single exploratory case study of an intermediary construction programme which had been set up to provide disadvantaged youth who were at risk of homelessness, access to work in the construction industry. Following Yin (2017), we adopted a single case study approach because as far as we are aware, the case study described below is the only example internationally of such an initiative. The programme was called Symud Ymlaen/ Moving Forward (SYMF) it provided individualised and tailored support and training alongside on-going mentoring and culminated in a 26-week paid construction work placement. Fitzpatrick *et al.* (2021) proposed a five-part homelessness prevention typology to explain the particular types of interventions needed at specific times to prevent homelessness: Universal - preventing or minimising homelessness risks across the whole population; Targeted - early-stage, focused prevention aimed at groups at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness; Crisis - the prevention of homelessness likely to occur within a foreseeable time period; Emergency - support for those at immediate risk of homelessness, especially those young people sleeping rough. Recovery - the prevention of repeat homelessness (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2021). Fitzpatrick *et al.* (2021) argues that if we are to end homelessness, we need to move resources upstream towards the universal prevention and targeted prevention components of the typology. The SYMF programme is an example of targeted homelessness prevention as it is aimed at young people who are at risk of experiencing homelessness (Schwan *et al.*, 2018).

To provide a theoretically informed empirical evidence-base around the social impact of this programme, an evaluative SROI was undertaken based on Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities empowerment approach and on evidence from semi-structured interviews with ten young people who were purposefully sampled on the basis of completing the programme. The SROI methodology was based on Nicholls *et al.* (2012) and involved the following steps: Step 1. Establish scope and consult key stakeholders - Once scope was established semi-structured interviews were conducted with SYMF participants to explore the impact of the programme against each capability variable, data was supplemented by programme evaluation forms distributed during the programme; Step 2. Mapping outcomes - A theory of change for the SYMF programme was developed showing the relationship between inputs, outputs and outcomes; Step 3. Evidencing and valuing outcomes - The semi-structured interview data was analysed to identify programme outcomes for participants using inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Guest *et al.*, 2012) based on a coding framework using Nussbaum's (2000) capability categories, followed by desk-top research to find and apply the most appropriate financial proxy for each outcome; Step 4. Establishing impact - Desk based research was conducted to establish deadweight (what would have happened anyway); Displacement (what activities were displaced); Attribution (who else contributed to the change) and drop-off (does the outcome drop off in future years); Step 5. Calculating the SROI - The outcomes were divided (once impact had been established) by inputs into the SYMF programme. The sensitivity analysis was undertaken in order to understand the difference different decisions would have made e.g., using higher or lower financial proxies. Following these stages, the results are presented below.

RESULTS

An evaluative theory of change was constructed, at the end of the SYMF programme with data from interviews with participants and desk-based research (See Table 1). The theory of change shows all the building blocks that were needed for the SYMF programme to reach its intended outcomes. A theory of change is a representation of all the steps needed for a programme to reach its intended outcomes and enables programme designers to be clear on long-term goals, identify measurable indicators of success and formulate actions to achieve these goals (Nicholls *et al.*, 2012).

In calculating programme inputs, the cost per participant was £13,477 which included pre-employability support and a paid 26-week work placement paid at minimum wage. An employer's time supporting, training and supervising a SYMF placement. Hogarth *et al.* (2012) calculated the costs of staff time for the first year of an apprenticeship was £6,584. As SYMF placements lasted for six months, we claimed for £3,292 for construction industry time. The inputs of the SYMF programme are listed in table 2. Data was analysed from the semi-structured interviews and the monitoring and evaluation forms distributed during the programme to determine the outcomes of the programme (see Table 3).

Desktop research was then undertaken to find the most appropriate financial proxies to value these outcomes (see Table 3). It can be challenging to value intangible outcomes (Arvidson *et al.*, 2010) and for this reason social value portals have begun to emerge to provide comparative and stable proxies for SROI practitioners to use. These are sometimes restricted to specific sectors. For example, the HACT (2018) value bank uses national surveys to isolate factors such as increased confidence or a person's wellbeing meaning it has been possible to calculate the amount of money

needed to improve a person’s wellbeing (Gosselin *et al.*, 2020). However, as Raiden *et al.* (2018) note there are no universal value banks, data sets or frameworks for assessing social value within the built environment. A summary of how each component of the capabilities approach was valued is detailed below.

Table 1: The Capabilities Approach: Theory of Change

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes: The Capabilities Approach	Impact
Cost per participant	Assessment	Construction specific accreditations	Life - Homelessness prevented (rough sleeping and staying in unsafe places)	Homelessness and repeat homelessness prevented
Mentors time	Mentoring support	Accreditations gained including literacy and numeracy	Bodily integrity - Practical knowledge of Health and Safety on a construction site	
Employer time	Occupational area identified	Completion of personal development plan	Health - Improved mental health, physical health and reduced harmful substance use.	
	Training courses	Completion of a work placement	Senses, Imagination and Thought - Contextualised learning of literacy and numeracy skills on a construction site.	
	26-week work placement		Emotions - Young people improve their relationships with their families.	
			Practical reason - young people reflect and <u>plan for the future</u>	
			Affiliation - Young people are better at talking to colleagues and strangers.	
			Other species - young people develop a concern for nature.	
			Play - Young people take part in recreational activities	
			Control over one's environment - Desistance from offending and young people progress into construction employment, apprenticeships, and vocational training	

Table 2: The Inputs of the SYMF Programme

Input	Description	Value
Cost per participant	Full costs of programme (£13,477 per participant) x 10.	£134,770
Mentors time	£11.85 an hour a week over 26-weeks (£308.10 per participant) x 10.	£3,081
Time of construction industry placement provider	Employer time supporting an apprentice for 6 months (£3,292 per participant)	£32,920
	Total inputs per ten participants	£170,771

The life component concerns being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; and not having one’s life reduced so it is not worth living (Nussbaum, 2000). An SROI of the Nightstop service where volunteer hosts in the community open their

homes to young people to prevent them sleeping rough or in an unsafe place valued preventing youth homelessness at £26,000 this is the financial proxy that was used to value the life component (McCoy and Kempton, 2016).

Homelessness makes it difficult for people to maintain their bodily integrity (McNaughton Nicholls, 2010). However, it was decided to value the training and experience of working on a live construction site which helped young people maintain their bodily integrity. The experience of following safe practices on a construction site in order to preserve bodily integrity has been valued at £2,507 for general work-related training to help find a new job (HACT, 2018).

Improved physical health will have a significant impact on a young person's life and is valuable. SYMF participants were aged 16-18 and improvements in physical health would be unlikely to result in significant cost savings until they are older. The HACT (2018) database values 'frequent mild exercise' at £2,130. New Economy Manchester (2019) has a value of £32 for a GP prescription costs per consultation this is the value that was used. For improved mental health a financial proxy was used from an SROI project that was a partnership between NHS Wales and charity Change Step a value of £9,926 (Lloyd, 2018). A financial proxy was used of £4,215 to value decreased substance misuse based on reductions in drug-related offences and effective treatment programmes taken from an SROI study on the value of youth work (Murphy, 2020).

The senses, imagination and thought component covers the cognitive capability to perceive, imagine and think informed by an adequate education including but not limited to literacy, numeracy, and scientific training (Nussbaum, 1993). Participants indicated they valued the opportunity to improve their literacy and numeracy skills while working on a construction site. Ideally, a financial proxy would have been used that valued contextualized learning to explain the value of learning on a construction site rather than a classroom. The HACT (2018) value of £484 for employment training was used to value this change.

For the emotion component participants indicated that they had improved how they managed their emotions while participating in the SYMF programme. An SROI of a parenting programme in Wales used a financial proxy of £600 the cost of six family therapy sessions this was used to value this change (Barnardo's Cymru, 2018).

The practical reason component concerns people participating in the planning and management of their own lives (Nussbaum, 1993). An analysis of participant's personal development plans showed that they had engaged in planning for the future, and critical reflection. To value this change a financial proxy of £1,316 was used the market value of a career development course (Leathem Bradly, 2014).

The affiliation component describes the sense of affiliation and concern for other people and the value these recognitions and affiliations add to the quality of our lives (Nussbaum, 1993). An SROI report of a parenting group used 40% of the HACT (2018) value totalling £740 to value being a member of a social group (Barnardo's Cymru, 2018). This financial proxy was used to value the affiliation component.

Other species is an important component of the empowerment capabilities framework. Bagnall *et al.* (2019) used a financial proxy of gardening as a hobby to value nature relatedness in an SROI of the Wildlife Trust of £847 per person.

The play component is about being able to laugh, play and enjoy recreational activities (Nussbaum, 1993). Two participants told us they were more likely to participate in

recreational activities following participating in the SYMF programme. The HACT (2018) value of attending a youth club at £2,464 was used to value this change.

Part of the control over one's life component is having the right to seek employment on an equal basis to others and having the freedom to control one's life (Nussbaum, 2000). New Economy Manchester (2019) reports the average cost per prisoner is £37,543 per year this was used to value the reduced strain on the prison system. Another SROI analysis of an employment programme valued reduced reliance on state benefits, increased tax take and national insurance payments and minimum wage to value increased income as a result of going into employment (Every, 2012). The same approach was updated and used consisting of Universal Credit, local housing allowance and minimum wage this totalled £15,325.64 (Gov.UK, 2021a, Welsh Government, 2021, Gov.UK 2021b). For young people who secured a construction apprenticeship the HACT (2018) proxy of £1,756 seemed low to value this change. Instead, the same methodology as progression into employment was used to value progressing into an apprenticeship (Every, 2012). The minimum wage rate for an apprentice, totals £7,605 a year with no income tax or NI (Gov.UK, 2021b). The HACT (2018) proxy of £1,019 was used to value young people going into training.

Table 3: Valuing the Capabilities Approach

CA Domain	Outcome	Proxy	Deadweight	Quantity
Life	Homelessness prevented	£26,000	15%	3
Bodily integrity	Health and safety knowledge	£2,507	15%	9
Health	Improved physical health	£32	27%	7
Health	Improved mental health	£9,926	27%	4
Health	Reduction in harmful substance use	£4,215	27%	6
Senses, imagination and thought	Contextualised learning of literacy and numeracy skills	£484	15%	9
Emotions	Improved relationships	£600	19%	3
Practical reason	Planning for the future	£1,316	27%	10
Affiliation	Better at talking to colleagues/strangers	£740	40%	3
Other species	Concern for nature	£2,258	19%	0
Play	Recreational activities	£2,464	19%	2
Control over one's environment	Reduced offending	£37,543	62.1%	4
Control over one's environment	Secured employment	£15,325.64	15%	4
Control over one's environment	Secured apprenticeship	£14,447.54	15%	3
Control over one's environment	Vocational training	£1,019	15%	2

Once evidence of change was collected and the most appropriate financial proxies were selected, counterfactuals (adjustments to reflect the impact of the programme) and negative impacts needed to be accounted for to establish social impact (Nicholls *et al.*, 2012). The most important of these is deadweight (Fujiwara, 2015) which refers to how much change would have happened anyway. Pathak and Dattani (2014) suggests, as it is unlikely that the perfect counterfactual is available and measuring deadweight will more than likely have to be an estimate. For example, HACT (2018) estimate that 15% of young people would get a job anyway without an employment intervention. Nicholls *et al.* (2012) proposes using data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS), government departments or sector groups that represent the interest

of stakeholders. However, Pathak and Dattani (2014) use the examples of welfare to work programmes for young people explaining the typical counterfactual to use would be the regional government statistics although in some cases the counterfactual might need to be adjusted. For example, if young people are the hardest to reach because of harmful substance use or being known to the criminal justice system, then deadweight might be overestimated leading to the SROI being understated.

In calculating the SROI ratio, the impact was divided by the inputs of the SYMF programme. A sensitivity analysis was completed in order to establish the difference different decisions would have made e.g., using higher or lower financial proxies. This resulted in a SROI ratio of £3.08 this means for every £1 invested in the programme there was wider social value creation of £3.08.

CONCLUSIONS

Using the capabilities approach to underpin an evaluative SROI of an intermediate labour market programme set up for young people at risk of homelessness in Wales UK, this paper has provided some important missing theoretical and empirical insights into the potential impact of social procurement policies in construction (Troje and Andersson, 2020, Raiden *et al.*, 2018). Acknowledging the limitations of SROI as a methodology, this paper provides a rigorous basis for the theoretically sound design and evaluation of similar programmes in the future as social procurement policies are increasingly used by governments around the world to leverage their construction spending to create social value in the communities they represent. The findings show that the Capability Empowerment framework provides a potentially valuable framework to design and evaluate other types of social procurement programmes. However, we would note that this should rest on evidence that this framework has been demonstrated in a priori research to be of value in these other contexts. It is likely that other theories will be found which could form more reliable foundations for the design and evaluation of social procurement programmes in other disadvantaged cohort contexts.

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