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CAN'T YOU COUNT? PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY AND STANDARDIZED MEASUREMENT CHALLENGES – THE CASE OF COMMUNITY COMPOSTING

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ABSTRACT

Performance measurement is increasingly important for UK third sector organisations (TSOs) driven in part by policy makers' interest in harnessing them as deliverers of public services. This paper examines a developing and little researched constituency of TSOs - community composters - which has become attractive to policy makers facing obligations to reduce, recycle and re-use waste. The research, which included the first extensive survey of this constituency combined with a purposive case study investigation, found a highly diverse set of organisations. The analysis proposes five types of community composters and explores the challenges to developing a standardized measurement regime.

Key words: performance measurement, third sector, community composting, social value.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The new public management agenda has seen a shift from government to governance (Stoker, 1998) in a ‘hollowed out’ state (Rhodes, 1997; Frederickson and Frederickson, 2006) where responsibilities to plan social provision are distinguished from the role of delivering that provision. One well-known effect of this shift to ‘shrink’ the state is a contracting regime involving the outsourcing of public services to organisations in the private and third sector. This has meant ‘increasing expectations are placed on charitable cause organisations’ (Crouch, 2011, p168) and the dispersal of services is not merely ‘technical’ but raises questions about the power exercised through regulation, contracting and monitoring (Clarke and Newman 1997, p26).

The contracting regime has become increasingly important for the third sector with estimates suggesting government accounts for one-third of the sector’s total income (Wood and Leighton, 2010). The shift to contracting out services has been accompanied by requirements for formalized performance measurement. The requirements go beyond accounting for financial inputs and outputs to include the outcomes, impacts and service quality. However, there are acute limitations in practice to developing ‘sophisticated performance metrics’ because ‘there are many types of third parties, many different ways to implement public policy’ (Frederickson and Frederickson 2006, p172).

Third sector organisations (TSO) – including charities, social enterprises, community-based organisations and co-operatives have an important and often innovative role in public service delivery (Department of Health, 2010; Defra, 2011) and hold out the promise of achieving a ‘triple’ bottom line, delivering social, environmental and economic objectives. TSO are contractors across a range of public services, including health and social care (Millar and Hall, 2012); prison and probation (Social Finance, 2010); employment and back-to-work

programmes (Aiken & Bode, 2009) as well as, the focus of this paper, waste, composting and resource management (Defra, 2011). Community composting groups (CCG) have tended to be categorized by policy makers as a single sub-sector of organisations within the much larger community waste sector (CWS) - a view which we will challenge as being too simplistic.

The CWS is considered to have an important role to play in meeting on-going national and European recycling targets (Williams et al, 2005). UK Government has stated its commitment to increase the CWS share of waste management contracts (Defra, 2007). It has also highlighted the potential of community composting for delivering local environmental, economic and social benefits (Defra, 2011). Alongside this are moves from government to identify and measure outcomes and impacts of CWS and the less well known community composters (Slater et al, 2010; Resources for Change, 2011; James, 2011) which reflects the wider 'policy push' to promote standardized performance measurement. Commissioners are being asked to build measurement processes into procurement processes (HM Treasury, 2011). The UK Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 reinforces measurement creep in stipulating economic, environmental and social wellbeing be considered when commissioning public services.

This push for measurement is not limited to the UK. For example, the use of Social Return on Investment (SROI), originally developed in the US, and encouraged in the UK (Nicholls, 2007; Gibbon and Dey, 2011; Millar and Hall, 2012), can be seen across Europe, US, Australia, Canada and China and SROI Network International has members from 27 countries (SROI Network, 2013).

In addition, practitioners in TSOs have developed a myriad of tools. Nef (2005) identified 22 models for measuring social value. Multi-purpose community organisations

developed a range of toolkits, guides and health checks (bassac, 2004; DTA, 2008; DTA and Byrne, 2005). Some TSOs developed their own performance tools whilst others customized existing ones (Millar and Hall, 2012). Nevertheless, uptake beyond measures required by contracts remains relatively low (Wood and Leighton, 2010) and calls remain, in relation to the implementation of the Social Value Act, for standard formalized systems (Georgeson, 2012).

Against this backdrop of interest in CCG as service providers and associated requirements for measurement, there is surprisingly little known about the nature of community composting, the extent to which composters are, or have the potential to be, service providers, and the extent to which they identify and measure their work. This paper starts to address this gap in knowledge. Our overarching research question asks: what types of organisations undertake community composting and is standardized performance measurement realistic across CCGs?

The paper is organized in the following way. Section two draws on theoretical considerations to inform our understanding of standardizing measurement (Paton, 2003; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Power, 1994). Section three presents the research methods and findings which show that community composters are not a homogeneous group with much variability in the ways they measure performance. Section four discusses the implications arising from the research and suggests standardized performance measurement presents practical and conceptual challenges.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Standardized measurement processes hold out the promise, at first sight, of making life easier for policy makers and commissioners of services while providing the best value for the

public. However, setting standard data requirements in relation to producing public goods present difficulties, two of which are pertinent to the measurement of the work of CCGs.

First, in social and environmental policy contexts the ‘*product*’ which third sector organisations are providing is likely to be difficult to assess with measurement correspondingly complex. Some authors argue that contracting processes may imply less trust between parties with a shift from ‘trust-based to regulated inter-organisational relations’ which involves ever more extensive and onerous specification (Milbourne, 2013, p7). Second, these services may be enhanced or only function because they are *conglomerated* within other provision. A community café and garden project on a housing estate may provide, for example, a promising composting location. Stripping out an activity from the context of a particular community organisation and over specifying the product may hamper outcomes.

Community composting represents a relatively embryonic arena of third sector activity which has begun to attract serious policy attention since 2007, as a result there is now increasing and understandable government interest in measuring and assessing these endeavours. For this reason it is a useful research area for examining the application and appropriateness of measurement regimes and may offer insights relevant to more established policy fields.

Power’s (1994, p7) framework of control and accountability offers a first entry into some of the dilemmas of measurement standardisation. It contrasts two simple models – Style A and Style B. Style A is characterized as quantitative, single measures, low trust and mediated by external agencies at a distance while style B is typified as qualitative, involving multiple measures, high trust and internal agencies using local methods (see Table 1). Power argues that in practice there has been ‘an overwhelming priority for Style A as the solution to

any problem’ (Power, 1994, p7). This is exemplified by the familiar ‘target culture’ in public service accountability, and according to Boyle (2001) such numerical proxies tend to distort organisational behaviours away from what organisational stakeholders see as most important. This supports Power’s (1994) contention that a reliance on Style A has displaced Style B, or prevented such approaches from gaining traction.

Table 1: Style A and Style B approaches to control and accountability (from Power, 1994, p7)

STYLE A Characteristics	STYLE B characteristics
Quantitative	Qualitative
Single Measure	Multiple Measures
External Agencies	Internal Agencies
Long Distance	Local Methods
Low Trust	High Trust
Discipline	Autonomy
Ex Post Control	Real Time Control
Private	Experts Public Dialogue

We prefer not to overdraw the line between these two styles in a simplistic way. Rather, we see these as ideal types in a Weberian sense, neither of which will be perfectly realized in reality and so we should be unsurprised to see approaches which mix A and B. Hatherly (1994) argues that the dichotomy between A and B is overly simple and does not represent the full range of possibilities. Hatherly’s (1999) work on the relations between shareholders, auditing companies and auditees found professional expert judgement could still prevail even in settings apparently close to Style A. Hence, Styles A and B are not reified as two mutually exclusive entities but nevertheless they provide a useful lens to explore approaches to measurement in CCGs to which we return in the discussion.

Moving beyond the A/B dichotomy there is a deeper issue which concerns what counts as reliable knowledge about performance. Power (1994), and Paton's (2003) work on measurement in the third sector, argue for an epistemology which is more social constructivist in nature and which incorporates stakeholders' accounts of what may have changed in addition to other baseline data. Power contends that auditing processes are not 'neutral acts of verification but actively shape the design and interpretation of "auditable" performance' (Power, 2000, p115). What may be important is the extent to which such activities support 'deliberative processes' amongst stakeholders (Power 2000, p117). This is highly pertinent for small and local organisations in the third sector. They may be undertaking distinctive tasks, operating in different environments, and with different goals and resources when compared to their neighbours in the next town. In short, as Paton points out, performance is multi-faceted and depends on what is valued. He argues that measurement processes can most usefully offer 'provisional achievements towards a loose-knit and evolving bundle of aspirations more or less shared within a particular network of stakeholders' (Paton 2003, p6).

Standardized measurement may emerge from 'coercive' forces from policy makers or commissioners but it is also important to understand processes operating between organisations, which builds on Paton's notion of shared agreement. Standardisation – including measurement norms – can emerge between organisations undertaking similar work over time. Institutional theory views measurement processes as making up some of the structures and routines in organisations which are 'institutionalized within wider environments' (Scott and Meyer, 1994, p2) or fields. Third sector organisations operating in a field tend to become similar (Paton, 2003, p157) and fields tend to lead organisations, over time, to share and adopt similar practices and common meaning systems (Powell and

DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1995). An obvious example is the way organisations' financial accounts appear broadly similar within a given field to meet regulatory requirements.

Two areas are of particular importance for the discussion in this paper. First, an initiative by a regulator, policy maker or practitioner to commence measurement (e.g. 'how many community groups undertake composting' or 'which organisations undertake environmental audits') may signal, or play a causal role in shaping, a new organisational field. That is, 'a community of organizations which partake in a common meaning system' (Scott, 1995, p6; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). This is important for CCGs because the degree to which they recognize themselves as being, or not being, in a common field may have important consequences for how they behave in relation to measurement processes.

Second, institutional theory offers insights concerning the patterning within organisations which arise from wider social and cultural meanings or 'legitimation' (Suchman, 1995) about acceptable or desired behaviours. In that sense (non-coercive) expectations concerning measurement or reporting processes may arise in a field and these exert a normative 'mimetic' effect on organisations. For example, producing a social responsibility statement or an environmental report may become expected practices in some settings.

In summary, Power's (1994) framework provides a useful lens for exploring measurement approaches and aspects of institutional theory aid understandings of how measurement becomes standardized. These are returned to in the discussion section and considered in the context of community composting.

COMMUNITY COMPOSTING

The third sector in waste and resource management is often referred to as the community waste sector (CWS). The CWS came to prominence in the UK during the 1970s and 1980s pioneering kerbside collection and recycling and today CWS is established in waste reduction, refurbishment and re-use, recycling and community composting.

Since the 1990s the amount of recycling as well as composting of household waste in the UK has increased significantly, driven by European and national targets. The CWS is considered to have an important role to play in meeting on-going targets (Williams et al, 2005), the UK government has stated its commitment to increase the CWS share of waste management contracts (Defra, 2007) and its support for community composting (Defra, 2011). In line with other areas of public service delivery this is likely to be accompanied by increased pressure for performance measurement and there are calls for standard measurement processes across the CWS (Georgeson, 2012).

In parallel, there are moves from government to identify and measure environmental and social impacts of CWS projects including community composting (Slater et al, 2010; Resources for Change, 2011; James, 2011) and performance measurement is considered to increase the likelihood of funding from local authorities and elsewhere. Community composting is thus attracting increasing attention from policy makers who see this as a coherent field of activity.

Research aim and methods

This study of CCGs and performance measurement was one part of an evaluation of community composting funded by the UK Government's Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

In order to address our overarching research question: ‘what types of organisations undertake community composting and is standardized performance measurement realistic across CCGs?’ three sub-questions were devised:

RQ1: What is the nature of CCGs in the UK?

RQ2: What are the outputs and outcomes from community composting activity?

RQ3: Are the outputs and outcomes measured?

The research employed a mixed methods approach. Stage 1 involved a survey to collect predominantly quantitative data from CCGs across the UK. Stage 2 involved a series of nine in-depth workshops to collect qualitative data from CCGs and their stakeholders.

The survey method was appropriate as it was necessary to first profile CCGs, which involved targeting a large number of groups across a geographically dispersed area in order to estimate the number and type of groups involved, and the scale and nature of activities. Questions focused on the outputs of activity, i.e. the direct, tangible and often easily quantifiable products such as tonnes of waste collected and composted, participation rates and number of volunteers. Using a series of open and closed questions we asked respondents to identify and rank their social, environmental and educational outputs, whether they measure these outputs and if so how, and the importance they place on measurement.

Survey data was collected using postal questionnaires, with telephone chase-up and clarification where necessary. It represents the largest survey of community composting undertaken in the UK to-date (n=243) with a high response rate of 61 per cent (n=149). Extrapolation was weighted for robustness and to account for a higher response rate from known larger-scale sites. Data was analysed in SPSS using mainly descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations.

Stage 2 comprised in-depth qualitative data collection via a series of nine one-day participatory workshops involving over 150 stakeholders and focused on identifying the outcomes of community composting activity, i.e. the changes, benefits, learning or other effects that happen as a result of an organisation's activity but are often less easy than outputs to measure. The workshops used a storyboard process to show how community composting activity (the inputs) produce results (the outputs) that help to bring about change (the outcomes) (nef, 2009).

The first four of the nine workshops were regional and conducted with a mix of practitioners from CCGs. The subsequent five workshops worked with individual CCGs and a range of their key stakeholders. These groups were purposively sampled to represent the diversity identified in Stage 1 and the regional workshops. Typically stakeholders included the project manager, employees and volunteers, board members, user groups and beneficiaries including training placements, residents, local councils, local agencies and schools. The workshop approach was appropriate for generating the rich data required to understand community composting outcomes and measurement processes, however, we acknowledge the limitation for this approach in terms of extrapolation and generalisation of results.

Research findings

To address the research questions this section presents findings on: a) the nature of CCGs in the UK; b) the outputs and outcomes from community composting activity; and c) the measurement of outputs and outcomes. We then draw together the main findings and propose a five part framework categorising CCG types.

a) The nature of CCGs in the UK

The survey in stage 1 found over 100 groups were active in carrying out or promoting community composting. Heterogeneity and diversity was prevalent within a number of different dimensions, including: the type, size and scale of groups; types of objectives and activities; ways in which performance was measured.

An important finding was that over one-third of community composters were informal or unincorporated groups which is in contrast to the wider CWS where the vast majority were companies limited by guarantee and/or charities (Williams et al, 2005).

Community composting was heavily dependent upon volunteers, although individual groups could be located across a spectrum. At one end were groups run entirely by volunteers, at the other end were groups with a small number of staff and very few volunteers, these tended to provide intermediate labour opportunities, training or therapeutic work environments. Around two-thirds of groups employed a small number of paid staff; half of these had one or two employees.

A spectrum was also observed across many other features:

- around two-thirds of groups were very small scale and composted between 0- 30 tonnes per annum (tpa), 12 per cent composted between 30-100tpa, and 22 per cent composted in excess of 100tpa, of which there were several large scale groups (n=14) that composted in excess of 500tpa.
- Composting was not the main activity for 60 per cent of groups, which illustrates how composting was often a complementary activity to help achieve other more primary objectives.

- As would be expected the micro groups reported the lowest income and the largest groups the highest income. There was a weaker correlation between size and income for the small to medium size groups.

b) Outputs and outcomes of community composting activity

Findings show that community composting activities were found in community groups that:

1) collected/received and processed organic waste material; 2) ran education campaigns; 3) promoted home composting; 4) facilitated others to develop/promote community composting.

CCGs carried out at least one of these activities and many were involved in more than one.

As outlined above, for the majority of CCGs (60 per cent) composting was a complementary activity to help achieve other environmental and/or social objectives. For example, for some CCGs composting was part of a wider recycling and re-use project. For others it was part of a wider land-use project involving local food growing and often linked to healthy diet and cooking projects or regeneration and green space making frequently linked to community gardens and city farms. Many such projects were aimed at developing life and work skills, providing training and/or a social setting for often hard to reach or disadvantaged groups such as long-term unemployed, adults with learning difficulties, senior citizens and black and minority ethnic groups.

The most common outputs identified in the survey related directly to community composting included: quantity of material collected and/or composted; number of educational events; number of volunteers and/or placements; number of households using the service; number of households home composting.

Participants stressed that composting was often an integrated part of a broader project and hence it was often difficult to directly attribute outputs to composting.

Stage 2 revealed outcomes for stakeholders not reported in Stage 1. What was striking about many of the outcomes was that they were much broader with wider non-composting benefits than the research originally anticipated. The outcomes for individuals are summarized as (Slater et al, 2010):

- Improved health and well-being
- Feelings of safety and sense of belonging
- Increased engagement in meaningful activity and learning new skills
- Increased engagement in pro-social / environmental behaviour

Broadly speaking, the importance of the outcome reflected the extent to which groups involved placements, trainees and volunteers. Improved personal confidence and self-esteem were important factors underpinning improved wellbeing.

Many participants spoke of positive outcomes from their involvement in composting. This ranged from young adults previously excluded from education through to older people, retired and sometimes isolated. Staff spoke about their pride and satisfaction at being involved in something that benefits their community. A small sample of quotes from participants illustrates these wider benefits:

‘I did an environmental course and secured a place at university.

Volunteering has pretty much given me a future’

‘I never thought I could do anything, all of a sudden I was changing

that and now I’m doing my English GCSE. I really have gained a lot’

‘At first I was very timid but now I have blossomed. It has helped me become much more confident’

‘Being part of something that is positive and proactive makes a heck of a difference’

‘It’s not just collections, it’s also about conversations’

Householders using composting services, especially isolated individuals, also reported beneficial effects, albeit to a lesser degree than for those working directly with the project.

c) Are the outputs and outcomes measured?

Findings revealed that just over two-thirds of groups (69 per cent) carried out some form of performance measurement almost exclusively focused on outputs and there was no correlation between the output and the type and size of group. The most common outputs measured were: tonnes collected / composted (n=28); number of school visits (n=23); number of volunteers / trainees (n=19); number of workshops / talk / events (n=12). Many other outputs were measured that were common to only a few groups (less than 5), which further highlights the diversity across CCGs.

Outputs tell a limited view of the story. However, in general, the outcomes evidenced through stakeholder narratives in Stage 2 were not captured by the groups’ existing measurement approaches. The exception was two groups who worked with vulnerable people and used some measures of personal development. However, for the majority of composters this research represented the first time they had engaged with stakeholders to identify outcomes, and limited resources would prevent them doing so on a systematic and regular basis.

d) Categorising CCG types

Findings show the diverse nature of community composting. To help understand this diversity, and consider implications for performance measurement, we identified different characteristics of community composters and propose a five part framework in order to categorize CCG types which is set out in Table 2 below.

Table 2 – Five part framework to categorise CCG types

	Summary of CCG characteristics					
	Scale	Main activity	Source of material for composting	Staff and / or volunteers	Rural / suburban / urban	Other
Type I - composting clubs	micro / very small (<5 tpa**)	composting	householders bring to site	volunteers	rural	may run composting clubs***
Type II – land activities + composting	small (<30 tpa)	land-use + education	on-site and householders bring to site	mainly volunteers, small number of staff	rural / urban	training + education programmes
Type III – social activities + composting	small (<30 tpa)	services for disadvantaged + marginalised individuals	collect from householders + householders bring to site	staff +volunteers	rural / urban	training + education programmes
Type IV – 3Rs* + composting	small (<30 tpa) + medium (30-100 tpa)	waste reduction, re-use + recycling	collect from householders + commercial, householders bring to site	staff + volunteers	urban / suburban	may receive recycling credits from local authority
Type V – composting service providers	medium (30-100 tpa) + large (>100 tpa)	composting	collect from householders + commercial, parks and gardens, + householders bring to site	staff + possibly volunteers	suburban	may have service agreement or contract with local authority

* 3Rs = waste reduction, re-use and recycling

** tpa = tonnes per annum

*** composting clubs are where householders pay small fee to deposit waste and receive compost

Each CCG type is now illustrated by a real (anonymised) CCG from the research.

Type I: composting club

A small scheme started in 2004 run by 20 volunteers composting between 10-15tpa of garden waste. Volunteers collect, weigh, and mix the material, turn, sieve and bag the finished compost. Free bags of compost are available to volunteers and the rest is sold to put towards running costs, any excess is donated towards village activities. The scheme has won several awards for environmental and community service.

Type II: land activities + composter

An inner-city farm started over 30 years ago attracting thousands of visitors. It provides environmental education and recreational resources, grows plants and vegetables, composts its own garden waste and collects from households. The farm is heavily dependent on volunteers, has three paid staff and offers a small number of training placements.

Type III: social activities + composter

A registered charity that provides horticultural training including composting (since 2001), collects organic waste from households and compost is available to the local community. Activities include food growing, healthy diet and cooking targeted to vulnerable groups. Participants build their confidence and self-esteem whilst learning new skills. The award winning scheme also runs education and practical projects with schools.

Type IV: 3R's + composter

A charity concerned with waste reduction, re-use and recycling (3Rs). It collects dry recyclables and organic waste from households, runs a small composting site (10-30tpa), and co-ordinates a volunteer led scheme to promote home composting. It also runs an

environmental education centre and a nature reserve. It has a service level agreement with the local authority and receives recycling credits. It is run by a small number of paid staff and around 30 volunteers.

Type V: composting service provider

One social enterprise dedicated to composting several thousand tonnes of fruit, vegetable and garden waste each year, producing a number of composted products certified to a quality standard and sold to businesses, schools and householders. It has contracts with the local authority and has won awards for innovation.

Identifying broad types of CCG is helpful for characterising and understanding community composting but it is important to remember that CCG may be a hybrid of more than one sub-type.

There is no clear pattern of measurement within these different CCG types. Just under one-third of all groups did not conduct any measurement and around one-half of these considered measurements unimportant. These tended to be Type I: Composting Clubs, although a few were also present in the other CCG types. As noted previously, where measurement was carried out it was across a wider range of outputs. This suggests there is little scope for standardisation. Where measurement was undertaken it tended to be context specific and reflected the different characteristics of the CCG types. This draws attention to the importance of situated approaches to measurement in keeping with Power's 'Style B' approaches.

This characterisation could have important insights for policy, especially where the assumption is that CCGs constitute a 'field'. This framework suggests policy interest may be more pertinent to Type V organisations as being closer to service providers, however the majority of CCG come under Type I, II, III and IV.

DISCUSSION

The institutional home of UK policy and legislation governing community composting mainly falls under government departments responsible for waste management, although many activities benefit other areas such as social services and community development. As a result policymakers tend to view composting as a unifying waste management activity across organisations that carry out composting (rather than locating it partially within a social welfare arena) and hence treat them similarly as if constituting an entity or 'field.'

The findings show that some straightforward measurement of baseline data - in particular composting outputs - is of course, achievable. However this discussion proposes that a more sophisticated and standardized measurement *system*, incorporating social value measurement, may be both practically difficult and conceptually limited.

At a theoretical level, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) and Scott (1995) argue that 'the notion of field connotes the existence of a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system' (Scott, 1995, p6) although we would expect them to contain diversity and even competing or 'different beliefs, rules and models' (Scott, 2004, p22). The research found a range of organisations engaged in composting that are highly differentiated by mix of activities, size and scale. This makes it difficult, but not implausible, to theorise them as constitutive of a field.

However, there were also quite significant differences expressed about CCGs' purposes, interests and logic. The analysis of these differences, and our proposed five categories, suggests that there does not appear to be a community of organisations sharing a similar meaning system but rather a series of sub-groups some of which may link more coherently to other adjacent fields. For example, the composters in Type I ('clubs') and Type II ('land activities') are mainly small scale and link well to other constituencies such as pocket parks, litter pick groups or toy libraries which have 'working together in the local community' or 'integrating local people' as central aims and where undertaking a small scale and meaningful social project, rather than waste management activity, forms a major part of their work. Meanwhile Type IV (3R's+composters) and the larger contracting composters such as the Type V (service providers) may have similarities in mode of operation with sister organisations in waste and recycling or community transport.

Most starkly, it is difficult to envisage how Type I (club) could be put on a similar footing as Type V (service provider) in terms of consistent measurement systems. There are also likely to be more than just nuanced differences between those where composting is an 'add on' to either land (type II) or social (type III) activities. If this analysis is correct it has implications for how they are collectively treated by policymakers interested in them for one particular aspect, namely composting, because this may not be a strong unifying characteristic.

Given this evidence, and drawing on DiMaggio and Powell (1991) and Scott (1995) theoretical understanding of field, we suggest that the community composting field is 'under construction' and is best understood as 'partially institutionalized.' Hence, current demands for standardized performance measurement, or seeking to promote their collective growth, may not merely present practical difficulties but may be conceptually flawed. Some outputs,

such as tonnage of material collected might be counted – but this is basic counting and comparisons between type I and V in this respect could appear absurd. Where the field is only partially institutionalized comparisons between organisations are likely to be particularly problematic and quite misleading.

With a lack of tacit or implicit agreements on measurement processes it is even more important to consider the logic and purposes of the organisations themselves from the ‘inside out’. This means considering a ‘suite of measures’ (Paton, 2003) which become acceptable practices between knowledgeable agents within and around an organisation or group of similar organisations. The theory of knowledge here is more social constructive – whereby local actors and stakeholders construct a meaningful approach which provides a narrative to explain or assess their work against their objectives – and, in short, through deliberative and inferential practices (Schedler, 2012). Here it is helpful to return to Power’s (1994) Style A and Style B approaches to measurement. We contend that approaches which lean to Style B - qualitative, multiple methods, high trust and dialogical – are more appropriate in partially institutionalized fields. Processes strongly associated with Style A, which dominates the practice of standardized performance measurement are characterized by quantitative, single measures, low trust and private assessment. Seeking to undertake ‘objective and comparable numerical measurement’ across the constituency of community composters discovered in this research appears particularly misplaced. Drawing from Sen (2010, p240), there may be little problem in assessment between organisations offering broadly the same social good; however when ‘several dimensions of values are irreducible to each other’ we are in the realm of ‘non-commensurability’ where standard measures do not apply.

At this point we acknowledge some developments in measurement are underpinned by deliberative processes, such as SROI and Social Auditing and Accounting. However, these

processes are often not an end in itself but used to identify indicators that can be quantified with the aim of objective and comparable measurement. For individual CCGs many of the outcomes identified in this research are not amenable to quantification, a finding supported by other research that applied SROI to individual CWS groups (Resources for Change, 2011).

In addition to these conceptual limitations and practical challenges using specific tools, there are also general and more familiar limitations such as measurement burden and attribution (Paton, 2003; Ellis and Gregory, 2008; Baker, 2011) especially for small and quite informal organisations such as Types I, II and some of III and IV. How much money, time and endeavour is it appropriate for such groups to expend and, drawing from Murray et al (2010), what is the purpose of such assessment? At what point in a measurement process might demands to ‘prove that your organisation alone really made that particular difference’ become – bearing in mind the limitations on resources – a worthless pursuit? It may suffice to be reasonably confident that the organisation to some degree made an important ‘contribution’ (Baker, 2011, p29).

Hence, an assessment of community composters’ work needs to be undertaken in ways that are proportionate to their scale, mixture of social projects, resources, mission and objectives. It should also consider the limits to measurement where there is a highly heterogeneous constituency.

This research has underlined a gap between the expectations of policy makers for performance measures and the reality for practitioners. This is a finding echoed in Wood and Leighton (2010) where very few TSO - even well-established medium to large charities - were considered ready for the more demanding forms of measurement being sought by policymakers. This is both timely and important especially in light of the UK Public Services

(Social Value) Act, not least because those best at measurement may not be the most able or innovative deliverers.

CONCLUSION

There are significant difficulties in providing for standardized performance measures across the community composting constituency. In addition, small and informal organisations present a different dynamic in terms of the development of metrics compared to those existing within larger organisations. The burden of attempting such a measurement system may be prohibitive and, in terms of resources expended, even outweigh the groups' activity.

Although this research has focused on community composting in the UK, findings have wider applicability to areas with similar drives for measurement processes, divergences of types of organisations in partially-institutionalized fields and operating in similar contexts. From the research we suggest that in these situations devising measurement processes may need to proceed with caution and contain strong elements of narrational accounts which can identify benefits that are open to discussion between stakeholders, funders and policy makers. Such approaches may provide routes towards the important goals of understanding issues that matter to the producers and sponsors of the intended social goods: namely what were the plausible social benefits achieved, how were these accomplished and how might this be done better? These are more modest but perhaps more realistic approaches when compared to aspirations for consistent, comparable and standardized measures.

LIMITS TO RESEARCH

Data gathering for this research was limited to the UK, although general conclusions may have relevance to similar environments. Although the survey achieved a high response rate (61 per cent) the usual caveats apply, such as tendencies for over reporting in self completed

questionnaires. Results from the individual participatory workshops are limited in their generalizability and extrapolation. In addition, the research represents a ‘snapshot’ in time. At the time of writing additional survey work is underway which will allow for longitudinal analysis.

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