

Factsheet:

Social Return on Investment (SROI) as self-assessment method for NRNs

NRN Peer-to-peer Training - Module 7

England, May 2014

1. Social Return on Investment (SROI) method

1.1 Overview of the SROI Method

The SROI approach has been developed by the New Economics Foundation. SROI is essentially a framework developed from social accounting and more traditional cost-benefit approaches for understanding the effectiveness of public expenditure. The basic calculation is to determine the benefits to society as a whole (i.e. the 'social' return) from the investment of a sum of money by dividing the value of the benefits by the total amount invested:

SROI = <u>Value of benefits (£)</u> Investment (£)

Specific valuation measures are then applied to the indicators, and calculations made to subtract any deadweight (activity that would have occurred in the absence of the programme), activity that can be attributed to other programmes, or displacement of existing activity, in order to arrive at the value of the return on investment. A final stage may involve discounting future expected outcomes over a defined period of time in order to provide present value estimates of the outcomes.



Key points of the method:

- The method identifies the full range of values arising from an investment economic, social and environmental.
- The process is an 'outcomes/results-based' evaluation it measures change in ways that are relevant to people or organisations that have experienced change as a result of the investment, and/or contribute to that change.
- The method can be used to identify the value of changes that have occurred (summative evaluation), or to forecast the anticipated value of expected returns from an investment (formative evaluation), or even a mix of the two.
- The process is based on a 'logical chain' that identifies the following:



1.2 Simplifying the SROI approach & adapting the method to smaller activities/programmes, or organisations

SROI can be applied at a range of levels from an individual activity or local project, up to the level of a national programme implemented across a whole country. However it can be a fairly complex method to implement, which might not always be appropriate for small organisations with minimal resources. CCRI have been working on the development of a 'social return assessment' (SRA) tool that follows the principles of the Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework, but in a more straightforward manner that is easier to apply. It breaks the SROI down into manageable chunks and is designed principally to assist smaller organisations, or those with fewer resources or knowledge, to assess the impact of their activities in a meaningful and user-friendly way. An SRA can be undertaken for an organisation, or any project, programme or activity. It enables capturing the most important outcomes of a project or activity, and not just the 'things that are easy to measure'. In so doing it allows the social, economic and environmental impacts to be assessed in a useful and meaningful way. And if required, the value of these impacts can be compared to the initial investment to produce a ratio of benefits to investment. The tool can be used in advance of undertaking an activity- i.e. as a planning tool, trying to clarify a number of issues and expectations before work on the ground proceeds, or it can be undertaken retrospectively to assess impacts which have already happened, i.e. it can be used to evaluate impacts or to forecast impacts.

The main factors which will affect the decision over whether to implement a full SROI, or a reduced form such as an SRA, include the following:

- The purpose for which the assessment is required who is it for and how do you want to use it?
- The type of assessment needed do you really need to calculate the impact or express it in financial terms, or will describing the outcomes be enough?
- The complexity of the project i.e. the number of outputs or potential outcomes, and the numbers and types of beneficiaries
- The availability of data on which the assessment is to be based.
- The resources available to carry out the assessment (i.e. availability of person time, office and computing resources and access to project/activity data and records).

1.3 Implementing the SROI method: Stages of the SROI method

The Social Return assessment approach can be delivered in three stages:

Stage A: Exploring (and describing) the change

Describing the outcomes is a powerful tool in itself. That is the main purpose of Stage A, and it can be undertaken as a precursor to the later stages or as an impact exercise in its own right. Stage A is divided into two inter-related tasks, the first of which involves a scoping exercise.

The **scoping exercise** should cover the following:

- An account of what happened and who did what as the activity proceeded
- Current and planned activities which ones will be focussed on and over what time frame
- Identification of the various stakeholders involved, and your reasons for including or excluding them
- The purpose of the impact assessment how will it be used and who will be interested in it

The second part involves **consulting stakeholders** to understand what has changed, and why it has changed. It requires gathering information to help you understand the outcomes, i.e. how stakeholders might be affected and over what time frame the outcomes might play out. It is also about understanding how the outcomes might relate to each other and whether (or how) one outcome might lead to another. From this information flow diagrams can be used to help develop an **'impact map'** which identified which outcomes have occurred and whom they affect¹.

Stage B: Measuring the Change

The outcomes identified in Stage A are measured using 'indicators'. Not all the outcomes will be significant enough to measure, and measuring some outcomes may lead to double counting and in turn over-estimate the impact. The process of thinking about indicators should help to reveal this. In simple terms, indicators are ways of establishing that change has indeed taken place, and its rough

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¹ See Annex 2: Example of a simplified SROI 'impact map'

magnitude. For some outcomes it may be possible to capture data on more than one indicator, which can be helpful. Examples of indicators include the following:

- Increased resilience and self esteem
- Increase in supportive relationships
- Increase in sense of trust and belonging
- Increased emotional well-being
- Increased competence, engagement and purpose
- Increased capacity building and volunteering
- Development of skills

Once the indictors are selected data will need to be collected. In some cases this might be available within the organisation's records, in other cases active collection through interviews or questionnaires will be necessary. The results of the collected measurements will be summarised in the impact map spreadsheet. Once the indicators are identified a means of **approximating the financial value** must be selected. Financial proxies are chosen the most closely reflect the outcome being measured. Some examples of financial proxies are proved in the Annex.

Stage C: Calculating the Social return ratio.

Factors such as deadweight, attribution and displacement will need to be taken into account at this stage (to avoid under-estimating or over-estimating the scale of effects), and any potential inaccuracies of data reliability issues noted. Stage C would also incorporate any discounting of future expected impacts in order to provide present value measures of outcomes. The social return ratio can then be calculated through summing up the value of the outcomes over the period of interest and comparing to the amount of resources (money) invested in delivery.

2. Use of the SROI in the context of NRN self-assessment

2.1 Advantages/added value of using SROI

The advantages of the SROI method are:

- The method can be applied at any level, from a single project delivered locally, to a full NRN programme of activities delivered at a national level, or anywhere in-between.
- The method can be undertaken by outside evaluators, or as a self-assessment exercise to explore effectiveness of specific activities, or of networks as a whole. The outputs can be used to explore activity/programme reach, as well as whether expected outcomes are being delivered. Once the impact mapping exercise is completed the method has the potential to assist in monitoring impact, which can be particularly useful where new, re-designed, or innovative delivery approaches are being considered.
- The method can be tailored to the specific circumstances of the activity, and local/national context.
- The method focuses on measuring actual outcomes on the ground, as opposed to merely measuring outputs delivered. Thus is a far more effective and accurate measure of NRN achievements. Outcomes are identified by the evaluators themselves (which may be NRN personnel), and verified through reference to the programme intervention logic, and through evidence of occurrence. Only outcomes that can be measured are selected, thus avoiding vague and woolly concepts of improvement or change. Outcomes can only be assessed through using some form of measurable and verifiable indicator. Indicators must then be capable of being valued using financial approximations. The whole approach is based on being able to verify and validate the valuation of outcomes, providing a much higher level of confidence in the evaluation results.
- Values of outcomes are measured through a transparent process that accounts for the incidence
 of the outcome (i.e. the extent of the impact, the type of beneficiary, and numbers of person
 benefitting). The method also accounts for deadweight (outcomes that would have occurred
 without the NRN activity), attribution (outcomes that can be attributed to other
 programmes/activities), and displacement (outcomes that have displaced existing activity).
- The method is capable of capturing both existing outcomes (outcomes that have occurred up to the present over a period of time, i.e. summative), and potential or future outcomes (outcomes that are expected to occur over a future time period, i.e. formative), in the same spreadsheet mapping exercise. Summative and formative data can then be examined either separately or together through simple discounting exercises that measure outcomes in terms of present values.
- The impact mapping exercise (i.e. the development of a spreadsheet detailing outcomes, incidence, indicators, and values) creates much deeper understanding of how and where NRN activities are having an effect, whether the target populations are being reached, and whether activities are having the desired effects. The method enables alternative indicators and

- measures of value to be explored, in a transparent manner, in order to select measures that are most appropriate for the activity/NRN context under review.
- The results are easily communicated and understood by stakeholders and the policy community at local, national, and EU levels.

2.2 Necessary conditions for applying the SROI method in the NRN selfassessment context

However there are certain necessary conditions for applying the SROI method in the NRN self-assessment context, namely:

a) Timing

- The issue of timing is important, but it depends to a certain extent on the proposed utilisation of the results. If summative evaluation (i.e. assessment of changes that occurred) is anticipated then the methodology can be developed during the period of NRN activity, although even here it is important to ensure the indicators and measures are developed early in order to capture baseline situations. This requires development of the conceptual understanding of outcomes from the beginning, along with development of indicators and financial approximations. Once piloting and testing is complete, actual running of the model can then be left until the end of the particular programme cycle before data is collected and the model applied.
- If **formative evaluation** and or monitoring (i.e. assessment of expected changes/ forecast) are anticipated then early development of the entire model and impact map should be undertaken at the start of NRN activity. This will allow time to explore anticipated outcomes, and to engage in re-direction of effort where activities are not producing the desired level or form of outcomes. It will also provide a potentially useful management tool, increase understanding among personnel of the objectives of various NRN activities, as well as providing monitoring and evaluative functions.

b) Resources

- Standard Excel spreadsheet software is all that is required to undertake the approach, plus personnel with an understanding of how the methodology operates (see below under expertise). Time to undertake the analysis is also required. The SROI is not a standard evaluation approach (i.e. count the outputs, the numbers affected, and report, with some judgement about effectiveness); it requires some time to be invested in developing an intervention logic in order to identify outcomes. The whole process is outcomes driven and this step cannot be avoided. It also requires access to a range of potential indicators and sources from which to draw financial approximations.
- To a certain extent indicators and proxies can be standardised, but there may be a need to
 develop measures specific to each NRN, or even to each activity in some instances. Where local
 indicators need to be developed, time may need to be allocated for piloting and testing possible
 indicators, or outside expertise accessed to suggest/develop possible measures.
- Access to national or regional statistics may be required in order to determine incidence of measures, or to assist in selection and development of indicators.

c) Level of expertise

- The SROI methodology is relatively straightforward in terms of the basic workings of the calculations. It does not require any sophisticated software, or statistical skills on the part of users: the method is typically applied using a standard Excel spreadsheet, and the calculations are simple proportional measures for the most part. The only complexity in term of calculations are those relating to discounting, which is relevant if impacts are being predicted over a specific time period, and need to be expressed in present value terms. Discounting is a standard techniques used in cost-benefit analysis and is not complex, although some basic training might be required to help users understand the method.
- The approach is **conceptually demanding**, however, as it requires users to think about, and measure, the outcomes of activities in ways that are different to most current forms of evaluation. Rather than measure outputs of activities, users must go a step further and determine what effects a particular activity, or output of an activity, is actually having on a target population (i.e. **identify the 'outcomes'**). Then the user must identify both a means of measuring that outcome (which may require developing some form of scaled measure), and valuing the outcome in monetary terms. **Some training is likely to be required** here in order to develop the capacity to undertake this form of evaluation.

d) NRN/NSU needs

- NRN/NSU will require an understanding of the methodology, how it works, the reliability and validity of the measures, and how the results can be utilised. **The method is not perfect**, and carries with it some of the drawbacks of cost-benefit and monetary valuation approaches, which need to be appreciated when using the results to justify actions to policy personnel. Training in basic cost-benefit assessment techniques, as well as SROI, would therefore also be useful.
- Each NRN/NSU would need a designated expert (someone trained in the methodology) able to lead in the development and application of the method, and provide support to others in the network who may be involved in monitoring and/or evaluation.

Annex 1: Examples of financial proxies used to value outcomes

(Source: Paul Courtney, Carol Kambites and Malcolm Moseley (2014) Proving Our Value: The Gloucestershire Action Research Project. Final Report to South West Forum by the Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire)

<u>Outcome</u>	Financial proxy	<u>Source</u>	<u>Unit</u>	Value (£)
Resilience and	Cost of Cognitive Behavioural	Units Costs for Health and	Per	1,240
self-esteem	Therapy (CBT) to build	Social Care, Personal Social	person	
	psychological resilience	Services Research Unit	(p.p)	
Supportive	Annual value attributed to	BHPS data 1997-2003	p.p per	15,500
relationships	change to seeing friends and		yr	
	relatives most days from once			
	or twice a week			
Trust and	Annual value attributed to	BHPS data 1997-2003	p.p per	15,666
belonging	change to talking to		yr	
	neighbours most days from			
	one or twice a week			
Emotional	Value of mental health	Centre for Mental Health,	p.p	10,560
well-being	component on Quality of Life	June 2003		
	Adjusted			
Competence,	Additional median annual	ONS 2003	p.p per	2,940
engagement	wage for employed vs. self	2.10 2000	yr	_,5 .0
and purpose	employed people		,.	
	1 1.			
IT Skills	Cost of 3 day course in	http://www.reading.ac.uk/	p.p	870
	Microsoft Access at University	ssc/n/Short%20Courses/ms		
	of Reading	access.htm		

Annex 2: Example of a simplified SROI 'impact map'

Stakeholder group	Intended outcomes	Outputs	Actual outcomes	Indicator	Financial proxy	Deadweight / Attribution / Displacement	Present value (PV)
NRN							
Business community	Developing new product marketsProcessingAdding value	 Number of business beneficiaries Number of jobs created or safeguarded 	 Income and employment effects on local economy Improved sustainability of local businesses 	 Extent of local sourcing Number of businesses predicting growth over next 5 years 	Multiplier estimates from literature and secondary sources	% measures for deadweight, attribution and displacement	Present value of return, discounted over time period of interest
Voluntary and community sector	Projects to improve services and engage community	 Number of hours volunteering Jobs created through improved service 	 Increased community participation Increased self- confidence 	Number of residents reporting greater community integration	Hourly minimum wage		
LAGs	Improved understanding of application processes	Higher number of applications for grant funding	 Improved understanding of RDP Improved support for local community 	Increase in number of local businesses reporting support	Average grant funding per applicant		
Central government agencies							

Examples of completed spread-sheets for SROI

A. Example of Initial stage of an SROI - NRN Outcomes identification

Stakeholder	Intended	Outputs	Actual Outcomes/Results	Indicators	Financial proxies
group	outcomes/Results				
NRN	 Increase involvement of stakeholders Improve quality of RDP implementation Inform broader public and beneficiaries about RDP Foster innovation 	 Training events delivered Site visits organised Documents published and disseminated Input into meetings of LAGs/RDP scheme managers Networking events delivered 	 More participation in RDP by stakeholders Creation of a networking culture Improved quality of interactions between local, regional and national levels 	Perceived increase among stakeholders of increased collaboration for knowledge and innovation (Scale 1 - 5)	Estimate of time savings (cost per year based on hourly rate) from partnership work (dfT)
RDP programme beneficiaries	Increased involvement in RDP implementation. Become more informed about	 Access to information about funding opportunities Number of innovative projects 	 Improved understanding of RDP policy Increased linkages between farms/businesses and 	Number of beneficiaries predicting growth over next five years as a result of developing links with other stakeholders	Mean increase in turnover through diversification (Ekogen report)
	 RDP policy Become more informed about funding opportunities 	explored or applied for/undertaken. Formulation of links with other organisations	other parts of the local economy Increase in capacity to undertake innovative projects	Number of beneficiaries indicating higher level of understanding about RDP policy and funding.	Earnings differential acquired by taking a 1-year certified course of study (e.g. HNC)
	Undertake innovation		 Increased confidence in applying to RDP schemes/measures 	 Perceived extent to which entrepreneurship and innovation has increased as a result of NRN activities (Scale 1 – 5) 	 Return to a micro- business from investing in innovative activity
LAGs	Increased	 Enhanced 	 Greater awareness 	 Increase in number of 	 Value of increased and

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Stakeholder	Intended	Outputs	Actual Outcomes/Results	Indicators	Financial proxies
group	outcomes/Results				
	involvement in RDP implementation Become more informed about funding Foster innovation	understanding about RDP policy • Number of cross- border links developed	 and understanding of funding opportunities Improved capacity for developing links with other LAGs 	 funding applications supported Increased confidence of LAGs to support innovative developments (Scale 1 to 5) 	safeguarded sales arising from development through LEADER • Cost of a leadership management training course
Other NGOs & organisations	 Increased involvement of beneficiaries Foster/undertake innovation in agriculture, food production and forestry 	 Increase in number of innovative projects undertaken Creation of links between organisations in order to undertake RDP activities 	 Increased confidence in developing collaborative links. Greater level of involvement with other groups/organisations 	Perceived increased effectiveness of partnerships as a result of NRN activities (Scale 1 to 5) Number of organisations reporting development of innovative activity.	 dfT estimate of time savings (cost per year based on hourly rate) from partnership work Earnings differential from moving to a higher level of vocational qualification (e.g. from Level 1 to Level 2 NVQ)
Broader rural community	Become more informed about RDP policy Support innovation in agriculture, food production and forestry	 Attendance at network events Access to materials about the RDP and local events Support for innovative actions 	 Improved understanding of RDP aims and activities Improved capacity for local solutions to local problems 	 Perceived increase in capacity to generate local solutions to local problems (Scale 1 – 5) Perceived improvement in awareness and understanding of rural development activities in the area (Scale 1 – 5) 	 Average size of a charitable donation in the UK (Ekos social Impact study) Average hourly volunteer rate for England (Greenspace study)

B. Example of secondary stages of an SROI - NRN Outcomes identification

Stakeholder group	Financial proxies	Unit value	Number	Indicator	Deadweight, Attribution, Displacement	Drop-off and discounting (3.5% discount rate)
NRN	Estimate of time savings (cost per year based on hourly rate) from partnership work (dfT)	Cost per year saved by organisation £7,352 per yr	No. of organisations or individuals	0.75	DW = 0.3 Att. = 0.1 Dis.= 0.0	Drop off 20% per year
RDP programme beneficiaries	 Mean increase in turnover through diversification (Ekogen report) Earnings differential acquired by 	£1,099/farm business	100		DW = 0.2 Att. = 0.4 Dis.= 0.1	
	 taking a 1-year certified course of study (e.g. HNC) Return to a micro-business from investing in innovative activity 	£1,950/person	1,000		DW = 0.2 Att. = 0.0 Dis.= 0.0	
		£35,420/ business	250	0.5	DW = 0.4 Att. = 0.0 Dis.= 0.1	
LAGs	Value of increased and safeguarded sales arising from (tourism) development through LEADER	£17,274	24		DW = 0.60 Att. = 0.20 Dis.= 0.1	
	Cost of a leadership management training course	£780	125	0.6	DW = 0.3 Att. = 0.1 Dis.= 0.0	

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Stakeholder group	Financial proxies	Unit value	Number	Indicator	Deadweight, Attribution, Displacement	Drop-off and discounting (3.5% discount rate)
Other NGOs & organisations	 dfT estimate of time savings (cost per year based on hourly rate) from partnership work Earnings differential from moving to a higher level of vocational qualification (e.g. from Level 1 to Level 2 NVQ) 	Cost per year saved by organisation £7,352 per yr £1,456 per person per yr	50 100	0.45	DW = 0.3 Att. = 0.1 Dis.= 0.0 DW = 0.4 Att. = 0.2 Dis.= 0.0	
Broader rural community	 Average size of a charitable donation in the UK (Ekos social Impact study) Average hourly volunteer rate for England (Greenspace study) 	£372 per entity £13.90/person/hour	5,000	0.25	DW = 0.2 Att. = 0.0 Dis.= 0.0 DW = 0.2 Att. = 0.0 Dis.= 0.0	