

CPI + ANZSOG Reimagining Government Webinar Series

Record of group chat from Webinar Three

17 August 2021 "Meaningful Measurement"

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Background

This webinar explored the shift to meaningful measurement - the movement away from using measurement as a means of control - and instead using it as a way to learn about complex problems and the people experiencing them, to adapt and improve approaches. The panel was facilitated by Jane-Frances Kelly, Deputy CEO, Education, ANZSOG, and included Adrian Brown, Executive Director, CPI; Sara Fernandez, CEO, Oxford Hub; and Professor Jenny Lewis, Professor of Public Policy, School of Social and Political Sciences, The University of Melbourne.

The audience contributions to this conversation were captured over the course of the webinar in the chat room. Participants also spent ten minutes in a breakout room discussing what most resonated, what they disagreed with, and what changes they might make to their own practice as a result of the panel's reflections.

We have captured the comments and questions shared by audience members below. We've done very light-touch editing to ensure we reflect people's views and contributions authentically.

Observations

Mindsets we have around measurement

- We assume the route to scale is through numbers, rather than through changing mindsets, practices and policies that might ultimately create a wider impact.
- Talking about methods is a mistake - we should be exploring the underpinning ideas - how do we think change happens? We should discuss the elements of our own mindsets of which we may not be aware.
- Measure what we value, and value what we measure
- The obsession with measurement seems to be a hangover from the MBA bloom and the desire for micromanagement.
- We tie measurement to objectives to make it meaningful.
- Totally agree that measurement is a simplification of the truth, but reality can't be coped with without some degree of simplification. We do it all the time. Also agree that it is dangerous to obsess over a few key measures - there needs to be balance.
- When I've had a chance to bring the senior folk into discussions around measurement, they are much more amenable to doing things differently than we might be giving them credit for.

Using measurement for accountability

- Accountability is important for citizens to keep control over government - and can be a foundation for improvement.
- Control is not necessarily bad.

- Accountability is important - and we need to engage with the realities of government and look for ways to straddle both meaningfully.
- One partial resolution (not getting rid of accountability completely in a new paradigm) is accountability at the higher level - public reporting by government to parliament, for example - and measurement for learning at the lower level, where teams can improve their performance.
- Countable and accountable are not the same thing!
- You shouldn't 'hold to account', but make an account.
- I think the challenge with some definitions of accountability, which I don't disagree with, is that they're sometimes not wholly consistent with the legislative definitions of accountability we have in the Australian context.

Using storytelling and more relational approaches to measurement

- I think that falling into the 'quantitative versus qualitative' argument is a trap - that dichotomy is unhelpful.
- It is important to add storytelling and complexity to data.
- It's slow going but I've seen value in changing mindsets to allow for qualitative data (stories) to be gathered and shared. There needs to be an appetite for these data to be heard before they can influence change and start to tip the balance away from big data as the only truth.
- Surely we need both? Numbers and stories? We need enough information to compare options. The truth is - we can't fund everything.
- There is an assumption that governments collect the right data. From my experience, a lot of meaningless and biased qualitative data is collected. We are not able to determine effectiveness and ensure accountability through these. But that's all we've got...
- Very easy for people to default to wanting to measure the success of government services through numerical data. There are examples across a lot of UK government, especially if you consider cost as numerical data.
- Measurement should look beyond the numbers.
- Data often needs narrative to make numbers meaningful. Place-based approaches often have small steps that take many years to come to fruition. It's important to understand the data from the perspective of the viewer, not from our perspective. Measurement should be seen as a method to learn from, rather than reward or punishment.
- Storytelling is powerful but how to include it in a meaningful way is less clear. Especially at scale. Numbers are an important part of political culture, and changing this to a more sensitised or subjective approach would require a big culture change. Stories are also time consuming - very challenging in the increasingly compressed policy environment.
- Storytelling is a valuable measurement, with the ability for participants to choose their own evidence. The map is not the terrain - a heavy focus on spreadsheets is limiting.
- Both types of data are important and one isn't better than the other, the type you use is dependent on the question being asked. In addition, the audience you are reporting to is critical to making sure there's an understanding of the type and source of your data. Society impacts what and how you may present and report - different cultures need to be considered.

- I potentially disagree with the notion that narratives cannot be scaled (perhaps an AI could be developed to do this!).
- We need to shift power to people - and avoid measurement approaches that take away power from people experiencing the change.
- Relational, not mechanistic approaches to social impact are required.
- I'd like to see more measures of citizen engagement. In health in particular, focus more on patient/family engagement as opposed to experience
- Bring valid partners closer together to share measures.
- All programs operate on relational levels and are not mechanistic outcomes.
- Experience is passive. Too often, we're patient-centric in the same way that an abattoir is animal-centric. Our measures tend to gauge how efficient, effective and humane our systems are, but not how well we engage our populations in more effective self-management.
- I'm done with people, measurement might actually make a positive difference and be a motivator.
- I think relationships and purpose are the best motivators.

Problems in measuring and attributing outcomes

- Outcomes are like the weather - they depend on a multitude of interacting factors.
- Definitely need to hold ourselves accountable, and predominantly focus on things that are most within our control. A percentage increase in confidence for a child at the youth club is not within our control. A high quality provision with well trained staff, resources, and human approaches is definitely within our control. I'd like more accountability (of the right things, by the right people).
- Disagree that outcomes shouldn't be measured just because they're delivered by individuals - that feedback loop is critical for achieving outcomes.
- Use the LOGIC model of social impact that considers influences on final outcomes.
- There's a tension between accountability to funding bodies, reporting load for numbers at high level, versus meaningful measures e.g. case studies at the lower level. Some measures have so many factors that contribute to an outcome that it's hard to work out what measure is meaningful.
- A particularly useful approach used in the social sector is the logic model of monitoring and evaluation, which takes into account a wide range of inputs and influences and looks at outcomes as well as outputs.
- One consideration is that we operate in living systems that are always in flux so the importance of different influences on our inputs/outputs varies over time.

Other observations

- On balance: simplistically if you measure both quality and quantity that helps.
- There are no shortcuts to meaningful evaluation.
- Big mistake to simplify the process - consider the problems of measuring wellbeing by using GDP (terrible!!).

- Problem of scale - different things matter and need to be measured at different scales.
- As an academic, our performance is evaluated in a number of different ways including teaching outputs, research outputs, community engagement, leadership, etc..
- "Make everything as simple as possible but no simpler" - attributed to Einstein.
- In Australia, academics are commonly measured on 'impact', based on the number of citations and publications in academic journals, when this is often the least impactful thing they are doing. Direct engagement with policy makers is frequently far more impactful and influential, but less 'countable'!
- We need to understand and facilitate dialogue-learning as promoted by the good folk in the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.
- It's akin to learning assessments - measurement can be used as a formative tool or as an assessment tool.

Questions

- What we measure is often determined by how we frame the problem. Are some of the barriers to meaningful measurement about the challenges of problem definition, especially when dealing with wicked problems?
- How can we better measure qualitative data? As a researcher this is what I gather, but often find my data overshadowed by others' quantitative data (even if that is older or less relevant).
- How should we manage the trade-off between richness of qualitative data and the public/government expectations of reporting on specific quantitative measures about the performance of entire systems?
- What constitutes data? Do we give enough acknowledgement to warm data, contextual data, or evidence that may be localised or culture-specific?
- I agree that the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative data is unhelpful, but is reconciling the two desirable, and how do we achieve that?
- Facebook is collecting very granular 'stories' at an individual scale... Do we want government to do that (if we don't want just large scale, aggregate indicators)?
- Is it not a risk to conflate numerical data with all other types of data/information in these conversations?
- Are there examples we have of government solely using numerical data at scale, absent any narrative / qualitative information?
- How can we use qualitative measurements to enhance accounts, particularly in a policy and compliance environment?
- We need a balance - how do we know if we've got the balance right to get meaningful measurement? Any concrete examples?
- If we look at this systemically as well, what would be the broader effects of thinking about scale vs more narrow / localities accountabilities?
- Do our accountability and performance frameworks allow us to learn?
- Do systems change when causal links are not always identifiable, and when many factors may prevent output-based or outcomes-based approaches?

- How do we balance more contemporary models of measurement and evaluation with government constraints and machinery, if there are some we can't fundamentally change?
- Should we be more clear about the intent of the measurement (and ask, for example: "is something a performance/accountability or a learning measurement?")?
- Is government bold enough to ask people what they would want to be held to account for?
- Can we let the system own the outcomes?
- Can measures at scale indicate directional progress? Can they give some confidence that we're on the right track, to provide contextual support for more micro qualitative/quantitative measures?
- Where and when should goals be adjusted as we learn new things in trying to learn?
- How would you sum up the evolution of measurement?
- Can government become action researchers?
- Effective public accountability is ultimately about enabling the public's trust and confidence in the public sector - in an evolved NPM model, what does this look like for the large number of activities across the public sector in a way that does not overwhelm the public?
- Can we bring the accountability 'stakeholders' into the learning space?

And finally, some resources posted by our audience

- [CPI's Meaningful Measurement microsite](#) hosts curated materials on the topic, and links to join our Community of Practice - with interactive sessions, conversations and networking opportunities.
- Join our [Reimagining Government Community of Practice](#) to access interactive sessions, conversations and networking opportunities.
- The most significant change (MSC) technique is a participatory method based on stakeholder narratives. Stakeholders identify what they consider to be the most significant change resulting from the intervention. [In a recent webinar recording](#), Clear Horizon experts Dr Jess Dart and Lauren Siegmann explain MSC, and its impacts.
- Iain McGilchrist [talks eloquently](#) about the dangers of thinking we can predict and control everything. His book, *The Master and His Emissary* is also recommended.
- Iain McGilchrist's book [The Master and his Emissary](#) deals with the specialist hemispheric functioning of the brain.
- [A Very Pink Bike](#) explores one of the stories from one of Active Oxfordshire's Active Reach participants, collected by The Old Fire Station through storytelling evaluation:
- [Buurtzorg Nederland](#) is a Dutch home-care organization which has attracted international attention for its innovative use of independent nurse teams in delivering relatively low-cost care.
- Old Fire Station has produced a [guide](#) to using storytelling to evaluate impact - which details the Storytelling Methodology, and the 7 steps to storytelling. Really handy storytelling evaluation methodology resources here:

- ["The Goldilocks Challenge"](#) by Dean Karlan and Mary Kay Gugerty is a pragmatic guide to creating and implementing data strategies to support learning and evaluation for social sector organizations.
- [Human Learning System Case Studies](#) include examples of meaningful measurement from around the world.
- [Scaling Out, Scaling Up and Scaling Deep: Advancing Systemic Social Innovation and the Learning Processes to Support It](#) by Riddell and Moore (2015) distinguishes between scaling out (numbers), scaling deep (hearts and minds) and scaling up (policies etc)
- John Mortimer shared [an example](#) of a new form of measurement for a complex health prototype and stakeholders. This uses HLS type measures, using story-telling and data together.
- The principles of [Leadership for Learning](#) can be helpful in measurement discussions.
- Gro Emmertsen Lund, writing in 2011 has proposed that there is a need for what she calls '[5th Generation Evaluation](#)' that would better reflect the paradigm shift brought by complexity and the wider recognition of the social construction of knowledge. Fifth-generation evaluation assumes that appreciative and challenging inquiry that is contextual, relational and open-minded will create better opportunities for change and development than critical testing, exposure, diagnoses, comparison, analyses and prescriptive conclusions.
- Can we let the system own the outcomes? [Collective Leadership: Where Nothing is Clear and Everything Keeps Changing](#) explores.
- The Centre for Public Impact's Toby Lowe explains how [measurement can improve social interventions](#).
- The Apgar score is a good example of simple data being used to improve mother and child outcomes after childbirth. The key is the data is close to the action and is used to inform decisions and help drive learning and improvement. Sometimes the desire for more complex data is used as a way to avoid/put off making difficult decisions in challenging situations. Atul Gawande writes about [The Score](#) in The New Yorker.
- Toby Lowe and Beatriz Cano Buchholz of the Centre for Public Impact describe how the Finnish National Agency for Education's Innovation Centre are using [learning as a strategy to improve national education](#).
- [The Marmalade Recipe Book](#) has some ideas about what matters when working together.