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:

\[
\text{SROI} = \frac{\text{Value of benefits (£)}}{\text{Investment (£)}}
\]

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 affect.

**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 indicators 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 self-assessment 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 terms 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 technique 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)

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder group</th>
<th>Intended outcomes</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
<th>Actual outcomes</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Financial proxy</th>
<th>Deadweight / Attribution / Displacement</th>
<th>Present value (PV)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NRN</td>
<td>• Developing new product markets</td>
<td>• Number of business beneficiaries</td>
<td>• Income and employment effects on local economy</td>
<td>• Extent of local sourcing</td>
<td>• Multiplier estimates from literature and secondary sources</td>
<td>% measures for deadweight, attribution and displacement</td>
<td>Present value of return, discounted over time period of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business community</td>
<td>• Processing</td>
<td>• Number of jobs created or safeguarded</td>
<td>• Improved sustainability of local businesses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary and community sector</td>
<td>• Projects to improve services and engage community</td>
<td>• Increased community participation</td>
<td>• Number of residents reporting greater community integration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAGs</td>
<td>• Improved understanding of application processes</td>
<td>• Higher number of applications for grant funding</td>
<td>• Improved understanding of RDP</td>
<td>• Increase in number of local businesses reporting support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central government agencies</td>
<td>• Better understanding of application processes</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Average grant funding per applicant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Examples of completed spread-sheets for SROI

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder group</th>
<th>Intended outcomes/Results</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
<th>Actual Outcomes/Results</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Financial proxies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 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 RDP policy  
|                   | • Become more informed about funding opportunities  
|                   | • Undertake innovation  
|                   | • Access to information about funding opportunities  
|                   | • Number of innovative projects explored or applied for/undertaken.  
|                   | • Formulation of links with other organisations  
|                   | • Improved understanding of RDP policy  
|                   | • Increased linkages between farms/businesses and other parts of the local economy  
|                   | • Increase in capacity to undertake innovative projects  
|                   | • Increased confidence in applying to RDP schemes/measures  
|                   | • Number of beneficiaries predicting growth over next five years as a result of developing links with other stakeholders  
|                   | • Number of beneficiaries indicating higher level of understanding about RDP policy and funding.  
|                   | • Perceived extent to which entrepreneurship and innovation has increased as a result of NRN activities (Scale 1 – 5)  
|                   | • Mean increase in turnover through diversification (Ekogen report)  
|                   | • Earnings differential acquired by taking a 1-year certified course of study (e.g. HNC)  
|                   | • Return to a micro-business from investing in innovative activity  
| LAGs               | • Increased  
|                   | • Enhanced  
|                   | • Greater awareness  
|                   | • Increase in number of  
|                   | • Value of increased and
Factsheet: SROI as self-assessment method for NRNs

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

**Stakeholder group**: Intended outcomes/Results

- Involvement in RDP implementation
- Become more informed about funding
- Foster innovation

**Outputs**

- Understanding about RDP policy
- Number of cross-border links developed

**Actual Outcomes/Results**

- And understanding of funding opportunities
- Improved capacity for developing links with other LAGs

**Indicators**

- Funding applications supported
- Increased confidence of LAGs to support innovative developments (Scale 1 to 5)

**Financial proxies**

- Safeguarded sales arising from development through LEADER
- Cost of a leadership management training course
### B. Example of secondary stages of an SROI - NRN Outcomes identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder group</th>
<th>Financial proxies</th>
<th>Unit value</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Deadweight, Attribution, Displacement</th>
<th>Drop-off and discounting (3.5% discount rate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 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 10 | 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 taking a 1-year certified course of study (e.g. HNC)  
• Return to a micro-business from investing in innovative activity | £1,099/farm business  
£1,950/person  
£35,420/ business | 100  
1,000  
250 | 0.5 | DW = 0.2  
Att. = 0.4  
Dis. = 0.1 | |
| LAGs              | • Value of increased and safeguarded sales arising from (tourism) development through LEADER  
• Cost of a leadership management training course | £17,274  
£780 | 24  
125 | 0.6 | DW = 0.60  
Att. = 0.20  
Dis. = 0.1 | |
## Factsheet: SROI as self-assessment method for NRNs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholder group</th>
<th>Financial proxies</th>
<th>Unit value</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Deadweight, Attribution, Displacement</th>
<th>Drop-off and discounting (3.5% discount rate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Other NGOs & organisations         | • dIT 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  
5,000 | 0.25  
0.3 | DW = 0.2  
Att. = 0.0  
Dis. = 0.0  
DW = 0.2  
Att. = 0.0  
Dis. = 0.0 |