



Making and Using Evidence

Insights from Civil Society



Evidence & Civil Society

Civil society organisations such as voluntary groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or charitable foundations increasingly use and produce evidence. This can take lots of different forms: reports, research, briefings. And as greater quantities of data and information become available for public use, this opens even greater possibilities for users outside of traditional academic settings.

But evidence can be used in many ways, and for many purposes. What is the situation confronting civil society organisations? This document shows key factors that influence how some organisations in the UK use and think about evidence. Although they range from individuals and organisations to sectors and issue areas, they collectively lead to some key insights for practitioners and researchers.

'[S]ERVICE PROVISION IS...ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAVE VULNERABILITIES OR ARE VICTIMS OF CRIME...IT'S ABOUT MEETING THOSE NEEDS. IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BIGGER POPULATION ALL THE TIME.' (POLICY AND RESEARCH MANAGER)



Demographics
The size and characteristics of whoever at which the civil society organisation aims its interventions



Polarisation, Public Opinion
Wider attitudes and feelings towards the groups or issues that are at stake

ISSUE AREAS



Stakeholders
Other groups that interact with civil society organisations (such as policymakers, private businesses, public bodies)



Norms
Shared ideas and expectations about what counts as good practice, professionalism, or acceptability

SECTORS

'[MPs] LIKE THINGS BOUND UP TO LOOK PROFESSIONAL AND THEY LIKE THEM TO BE RIGOROUS AND...INDEPENDENT.' (POLICY DIRECTOR)

'[I]T IS IMPORTANT TO THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT TO GET OUT OF IT AT THE END—AT THE BEGINNING.' (PROGRAMME MANAGER)



Strategies
Practical guidance on where and how to spend resources like time and funds



Missions
Theories of change or vision statements that express the purpose of an organisation

ORGANISATIONS

'...NOT MANY PEOPLE CAN USE THE OPEN DATA THAT IS AVAILABLE. YOU DO HAVE TO HAVE SPECIALIST SKILLS.' (SENIOR RESEARCH OFFICER)

'PART OF OUR THEORY OF CHANGE IS...TO TRY TO INCREASE PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING SO THAT PEOPLE HAVE BETTER ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS.' (HEAD OF POLICY AND COMMUNICATIONS)



Skills
Specific abilities that individual team members bring (such as programming, statistical knowledge, volunteer management)



Motivations
Worldviews, ideals, or notions of satisfaction held by individuals

INDIVIDUALS

Insights for Practitioners & Researchers

Properly estimate the role of values and organisational objectives in decision-making. Organisations view evidence differently depending on its usefulness or worthiness in helping achieve a mission.

Address and develop new skillsets demanded by 'Big' and 'Open' datasets. These initiatives potentially make more information available, but present additional challenges for individuals and organisations that need certain skills to access and interpret them correctly.

Appreciate all parties' motivations, needs, and unique capacities. These place constraints upon, as well as open opportunities for collaboration.

Include time to develop shared goals and assess intended outcomes from the beginning. This provides space to allow everyone involved to become familiar with the specific mixes of needs and skills present.

Further Information

This document is based on research conducted in 2014-2015 among nine civil society organisations in the UK.

For more information, see:

Easton-Calabria, Evan and William Allen. Developing Ethical Approaches to Data and Civil Society: From Availability to Accessibility. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 28(1): 52-62. [OPEN ACCESS]

Allen, William. Factors That Impact How Civil Society Intermediaries Perceive Evidence. *Evidence & Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice*.

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