

Creative and social entrepreneurs want to change the world – an initiative in South Africa helps them measure their success

by Andrew Thompson

Creative and social entrepreneurs want to change the world. But how do they know if they are succeeding? Some get heavily involved in quantitative measurement, metrics, log frames and targets. “If you can’t measure it, it just didn’t happen” was a view expressed by a US-based public health awareness campaigner some years back. Others say the measurement mania can go too far and miss out on a whole range of qualitative and “softer” considerations. They quote a character in an Oscar Wilde play who defines a cynic as someone who “knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.” Is there some mid-point between these two extremes? What is the right balance between them?

One attempt to get a balanced approach is underway in South Africa. It is the local branch of the [Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs](#) (ANDE) which seeks to lift families, and entire nations, out of poverty. Set up a decade ago, ANDE is a global network of over 300 members dedicated to promoting what it calls SGBs - small and growing businesses. In South Africa it has around 50 members. It aims to help build a supportive ecosystem that will allow local SGBs to develop and flourish. That could make a real difference. The ultimate long-term vision is that more and stronger SGBs will significantly increase prosperity for citizens as measured by increased employment, increased wages, and a higher quality of life, including social and economic advances. Specifically, says Nonceba Qabazi of ANDE South Africa, the aim is to work through intermediaries to promote a “growth mindset” among small businesses, those that employ between 50 and 250 staff. SGBs can be described as part of the “missing middle” of the local business community – a group that is struggling to get access to finance.

Joining ANDE in this British Council-DICE funded project is [Social Value UK](#), part of Social Value International (SVI), also a global network with members in around 25 countries. Adam Richards of Social Value International says the network shares a fundamental objective which is to change the way the world accounts for social value. He laughs and adds “that is far more interesting than it actually sounds!” Of course, companies must be financially sustainable and measure profit or loss. But for those who want to go beyond that, there is a framework for assessing social impact. SVI proposes seven principles for measuring social value. These include involving stakeholders, understanding change, valuing the things that matter, including only what is relevant, avoiding over-claiming, being transparent and verifying results. These principles allow for adaptation to specific projects, businesses, and stakeholders. The idea is that they provide a flexible but robust way to measure change: neither the “measure everything” nor the “measure nothing” approach.

Both ANDE and SVI have already collaborated on a number of back-to-back ventures, so applying jointly to carry out a DICE-funded project in South Africa was a logical next step. The project focuses on introducing the concept of impact measurement and management (IMM) to 40-50 South African intermediary organisations which are in turn “cascading” the technique to around 400 social and creative enterprises. The project also seeks to build a community of practice for IMM techniques, particularly those relevant to enterprises working with marginalised groups and women. The two organisations have also built a tool kit including case studies to further disseminate IMM. Two-day workshops have been held focusing on critical targets, how to build a theory of change, how to involve stakeholders, how to



assess qualitative data, and how to measure the ultimate impact on the lives of the people involved.

Adam is passionate about what the technique can deliver. He acknowledges that there was initially some resistance to “importing” a toolkit from abroad but notes that in effect it has been co-authored by many different organisations. Once the South African practitioners understood it could be tailored to meet their specific needs and circumstances, they became much more confident in using it. He had been approached with a suggestion that the toolkit might be turned into an app for mobile phones, giving him what he calls “a genuine smile from ear to ear”. He adds “Impact measurement and management – the terms are so jargonistic and technical sounding! If you want to change government policy, yes, you need to be rigorous. But if you want to change the operation of a social enterprise, you don’t need to be so rigorous. Let’s not just hold ourselves to such unrealistic and unnecessary levels. Let’s change peoples’ lives and do so more effectively.” Ultimately, any project or creative and social enterprise must answer the “so what?” question: not just “what were its outputs”, but ‘what were its outcomes – how did things really change, from a people-centred point of view?

