



# THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY ABOUT SOCIAL VALUE

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# WHAT IS SOCIAL VALUE?

- How e.g. intervention, organisation or infrastructure could improve “*economic, social and environmental wellbeing*” (Public Services Social Value Act 2012)
- Distinct from social impact (which is narrower, more clearly defined temporally and in terms of the group affected) – but arguably not completely separable
- Not always clear **whose value** we mean: differences within and between different groups because of differing needs and preferences
- Whose values are legitimate, and whose are not? How is this decided?
- Value of infrastructure is **situated** and **dynamic**: subject to change, constantly evolving (along with function)

# EXAMPLE 1: CANALS

- Canals were built by wealthy industrialists to facilitate movement of goods and capitalist growth
- They were superseded by the railways, and fell into disuse and disrepair – dangerous, polluted
- Largely through grassroots campaigns, they were cleaned up and brought back into use – spaces of nature, leisure/tourism, heritage
- Now increasingly used as places to live, as ‘green corridors’ for cycling commuters, sites for housing development, places of fishing, walking, sexual encounter... etc.
- Convergence of competing values and functions of the canal **accrued over time** → contestation, struggles between different claims from different groups
- Changing patterns of use and ownership over time

# EXAMPLE 2: TIDAL LAGOON SWANSEA BAY

- Positive local responses
- Historical factors in Swansea: memories of exploitation of Wales' natural resources; environmental legacies of industry; loss of work through deindustrialisation; loss of civic pride / positive identity
- Contemporary factors: lack of 'decent jobs'; poverty; problems with drugs and alcohol; threats to public sector jobs and local steelworks; pride in and affection for local environment; 'emptying out' of city centre
- Specific ideas about what is *needed* and what is *valued* –some of these issues are specific to locality, others more generally relevant
- Differences between and amongst different groups of 'stakeholders'

# IDENTIFYING AND MEASURING SOCIAL VALUE

- Value is to some extent subjective – but what does this mean? We often see values as:

*“beyond the scope of reason [and] not susceptible to evidence or argument..... [having] nothing to do with the kind of beings that we are, or with what happens” (Sayer 2011: 3). ” (Sayer 2011: 3)*

- What we value has material dimensions (what we need) as well as psychosocial dimensions – value is the outcome of **processes of evaluation**
- We cannot fully disentangle objective/subjective which are mutually constitutive
- What people value is shaped by their social position, cultural background, etc.

# IDENTIFYING AND MEASURING SOCIAL VALUE

- Direct and indirect value – intrinsic and instrumental value
- Certain kinds of value creation (e.g. providing jobs) are easier to measure than ‘soft’ values (e.g. wellbeing, happiness, resilience, sense of community, etc.)
- How do we measure or engage with metaphorical concepts, which are hard to pin down, and contested (as well as being understood differently by different people)?
- Often leads to self-referential analysis
- Does defining value require some degree of **anticipation / prediction?** And if so, what are the methodological challenges? Unexpected outcomes?

# IDENTIFYING AND MEASURING SOCIAL VALUE

- Public engagement is seen as fundamental:  
*“Inform what gets measured and how this is measured and valued in an account of social value by involving stakeholders”*  
[\(http://www.socialvalueuk.org/why-social-value/the-principles-of-social-value/\)](http://www.socialvalueuk.org/why-social-value/the-principles-of-social-value/)
- There are limitations to public engagement:
  - Dominance of ‘the usual suspects’
  - Differences in capacity and inclination to engage
  - For planning, engagement is often low
  - Seen as tokenistic
- At what point is engagement carried out, for what purpose, and what options are available?
- Who are key stakeholders, and are they only local? Engagement normally at local levels.

# BALANCING DIFFERENT CLAIMS

- Measurement of social value often uses cost-benefit approach (e.g. SROI)

- How are different claims balanced?:

*“How do you weigh someone leaving their house to ten people getting a job, or being able to get more electricity or something? They’re apples and oranges aren’t they? They’re incomparable things.”* (Planning professional interviewee A)

- Differences between identified beneficiaries and as-yet-unknown:

*“the beneficiaries of new housing don’t live there yet...so you don’t know who they are”* (Planning professional interviewee C)

- Difficulties of weighing the abstract against the particular, the collective against the individual – becomes complex ethical question



# QUESTIONS RAISED

- Do we aim for **consensus** between different value claims, or...?
- How does the language of value sit alongside the language of rights?  
Or needs?
- To what extent is 'value' politicised?
- Is there a hierarchy of value? Which is most important?
- Are some forms of social value more readily translatable into economic value?
- Why (in relation to large-scale infrastructure) is ownership so frequently overlooked as a way of creating social value?