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Social return on investment: reflections on advancing the method within cities & health

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Understanding Social Return on Investment

Social return on investment is a method which moves beyond merely return on investment and captures the complex nature of benefits derived from projects which are often unquantifiable (LSE, 2019). It should be noted that there are numerous definitions and interpretations of the approach: it can be interpreted as a general approach, or a specific set of standards governed by Social Value International, or even as a 'sustainable' return on investment (see Bohmholdt, 2014). The Social Return on Investment Network (2012) (now Social Value International) conceptualise it as:

> *'a framework for measuring and accounting for this much broader concept of value; it seeks to reduce inequality and environmental degradation and improve wellbeing by incorporating social, environmental and economic costs and benefits'* (pg.8)

As a generalised approach, its use is sometimes indistinguishable from cost benefit analysis or standard public health methodologies for non-National Health Service interventions, such as quality-adjusted life years or the health equity assessment tool. The defined process, in this sense the 8 principles and standards from Social Value International, bring clarity and an emphasis on the perspective of the individual that extends from a qualitative definition of outcomes, through to valuation and causality (see figure 1). Banke–Thomas (2015 pg.12) found that 'the social return on investment methodology provides a platform to systematically account for broader outcomes'. Allowing individuals to define the outcomes to be measured and valued, which leads to the inclusion of broader themes. For example, in the city context this could include: civic pride, environmental awareness, economic opportunity and safety, to name but a few, that complement health. In this context, social return on investment studies can demonstrate wider benefits derived from the built environment which are not captured as explicitly through other approaches.

Figure 1: Social Value International's 8 principles (Social Value International, n.d.)

Whilst cost benefit analysis and public health methodologies, at their best, can also include these wider themes, in practice they often have a narrower focus and can be constrained by policy objectives. Social return on investment goes beyond the objectives of an intervention to assess impact (in the widest sense) and gives a voice to the individuals it has impact on. However, it is also of note that although this distinction remains, Government guidance in the UK for cost benefit analysis (the Green Book) is steadily moving to increase wellbeing in a broader sense. His Majesty's Treasury (2021) now requires that wellbeing concepts, measurement and estimation must be used according to the framework and processes provided by the Green Book.

Social return on investment has proven popular amongst community groups, local authorities, health bodies and other organisations alike, enabling them to demonstrate the significant impact of schemes or initiatives. Understandably, there are many critiques of the methodology, ranging from its explicit focus on monetary valuation, to concerns around the lack of rigor in which the technique has been employed (Hutchinson et al., 2019). In the post-COVID city, the use of the method has been upscaled, in part to convey the value of assets to policy makers and other key actors (Davies et al., 2020; Schoen et al., 2020). There has been a particular rise in the use of social return on investment within the broad area urban green infrastructure, with city

farms, community gardens, parks and a host of other similar schemes employing the approach; capturing the impact of social prescription schemes, to the value of local food and beyond.

In this editorial, we call for more engagement with the method for the purposes of exploring innovation in the context of cities and health. In part, this is to facilitate more investment in radical solutions in cities to address health inequalities and to promote more creative solutions to mitigate rapid urbanisation. As Grant et al. (2017: 2) argue in the first editorial of the journal, 'we need to involve ourselves with an innovative city futures agenda' and to think outside the box with regards to urban design. This is reiterated in subsequent editorials, such as Franco et al's (2022) reflections on the need for mixed methods studies as a way to generate healthier urban landscapes. With this in-mind, our editorial argues that social return on investment can be an vehicle for moving these agendas forwards, through developing healthier place-making and allowing the city to become a laboratory for change (Grant et al., 2017).

We proceed to reflect on a case study to provide an insight into the use of social return on investment within the realm of advancing the urban green agenda, a popular topic for discussion within this journal. In this sense, through creating more spaces for green social prescribing, local food production and wider activities which provide considerable social, environmental, economic and health benefits. With policy makers and other key actors burgeoning interest in the approach (Franco et al., 2022; Grant et al., 2017), we call for more studies in the journal to reflect on the method's ability to promote health and wellbeing within cityscapes: from advancing health equity to population and individual health. We also urge for critical engagement with the approach and aim to provide a snapshot of this within the editorial itself. This is particularly important, given the often explicit focus on the quantitative outputs of the methodology. Ultimately, with more novel solutions to addressing health within urban environments emerging, we aim to highlight the need to advance our understanding of this approach and its future value within innovations in cities and health.

Reflections on Practice within Urban Greening Initiatives

Within the urban greening agenda, social value appraisals have been popular, but the use of social return on investment methodologies have risen rapidly as of late. As Hunter et al. (2020) note, there has been a rise in the use of the method to quantify the benefits of often intangible assets; in this case, their study highlights the social return on investment of an urban greenway, showing that for every £1 invested, there would be between £2 and £6 in value returned. Green activities form the brunt of many recent social return on investment studies, particularly those related to the social prescribing agenda. In a study focussing on the social value in the Natural Health Services, which includes forest schools and other green activities, it was found that for every £1 invested, some £6.75 of value was derived (Cogent Ventures, 2012). Of particular note in the study was the impact of the forest school, which was proven to increase the physical activity and mental wellbeing of young people. Other benefits of this asset included its ability to enhance social skills, motivate attendees and develop emotional/related skills of those who participated (Cogent Ventrues, 2012). In addition to this, NEF Consulting (2016) found that involving a structured programme of environmental activities, through an

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Post-COVID, many of these spaces have diversified their offerings and many now employ a 'care farm' approach as part of their model; embedding social prescribing to generate additional revenue and enable greater impact on communities. In this sense, conventional health services can prescribe care farming for mental health or other wellbeing issues (Mitchell et al., 2021). In a study commissioned by Lewisham Clinical Commissioning Group, an urban care farm focussing on people recovering from physical and mental health generated an social return on investment value of £83.73 for every pound spent (Growing Together, N.D.). The social value generated by the average care farm is higher in comparison to a 'traditional' city farm, with studies showing that this sits between £4.00 for smaller schemes to much higher figures, such as the Lewisham study.

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Towards an 'Ideal' Approach for SROI

With city greening projects and other urban health interventions increasingly adopting social return on investment approaches to demonstrate their value, we argue that actors should be aware of limitations of the methodology and good practice. As we have already mentioned, the use of social return on investment goes beyond valuation in monetary terms, with Miller et al. (2016) suggesting that the '*methodology goes beyond economic analysis by focusing on the value of outcomes experienced by key stakeholders, rather than focusing solely on investments and outputs*' (pg. 2). The methodology employed to establish social valuation is complex, due to the lack of agreement on the approach used to generate calculations across funding, social organisations and policy making sectors (Mulgan, 2010). Multiple methods have been incorporated into this research field, covering the breadth of qualitative, quantitative, and participatory research techniques, as an attempt to demonstrate multiple outcome values from many stakeholder perceptions.

However, reviews of the broad approach show that:

- The majority of approaches are reported in a non-peer reviewed manner, with Gosselin, et al. (2020) suggesting that this consists of around 94% of the studies.
- Banke–Thomas (2015) illustrates that most studies (37.5%) use mixed methods to generate outcomes, whilst the majority only consider the primary beneficiary (52%), followed by the beneficiary and those implementing change (7.5%).
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In this sense, the literature shows that there is a lack of critical reflection on the use of social return on investment studies, alongside concerns around how the methodology is employed. In the context of urban greening, we urge actors to consider these issues and adopt an approach which values both qualitative and quantitative datasets. Whilst social return on investment can be a powerful ally, particularly for urban greening projects wishing to demonstrate their value and impact within cities, there is a need to select an effective and robust methodology. Global and national standards for social return on investment exist, through bodies such as Social Value International. This can provide a basis for project leads and other actors, if they are wishing to engage with the technique; enabling detailed datasets and outcomes which can overcome the risks highlighted above.

In the context of urban agriculture specifically, there is a real need to draw on methods, such as social return on investment, to capture the complexity of the activity. As Schoen et al. (2021) demonstrate, even the smallest community garden can have incredible value: using such an approach, they showed how one in London returned £3 for every £1 invested. In a similar manner to figure 1, social return on investment allows for the often intangible to be captured, which in turn can impact on funding decision, policy support and other key decision-makers helping to sustain urban agricultural practices. Our editorial here illustrates the use of the method within urban greening and agricultural projects, which often focus explicitly on tackling health inequalities within cities. Through social return on investment, we have shown how the approach can capture the complex value and impact of these schemes, particularly with regards to health and wellbeing, whilst conveying these messages to key decision-makers. However, reflections here also highlight the need to adopt rigorous approaches and to also capture the qualitative. In this sense, going beyond mere monetary value to provide a voice to communities, users and other benefactors of these schemes.

Moving Forwards

In this editorial, we aimed to raise awareness around interest in social return on investment within the context of cities and health, alongside encouraging more critical engagement with the approach in the journal. We provided a flavour of its value within urban greening and agricultural initiatives, which have adopted the approach to demonstrate their broad impacts and values. Our case study, and wider reflections, highlighted the need to be cautious of the social return on investment approach adopted, alongside ensuring that empirical evidence forms the brunt of any investigation. Yet, we have also illustrated the outputs from such methodologies and the potential to capture novel activities in ways which would be appealing to decision-makers. We hope this acts as a catalyst for further discussion in the journal and contributes to calls for approaches to evidence 'that supports creative city change and experimentation' (Grant et al., 2017: 5).

We feel that more engagement is particularly important, given the rise in creative approaches to urban health, especially with the upscaling of green social prescribing and other radical developments, such as urban agriculture. Future articles may question the role of social return on investment in advancing such innovations, to revealing more details on the complex value and impacts of practices. Beyond the urban green agenda, there are also questions around social return on investment's wider relevance in promoting sustainable transport and more meta solutions to creating healthier cityscapes. With decision-makers increasingly investing in these areas, discussion on social return on investment as a potential enabler is vital within the agenda of cities and health.

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2 University of Salford, UK
3 MoreThanOutputs, UK
4 Peel Land & Property, UK
5 Edge Hill University, UK

Abstract

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In the context of urban agriculture specifically, there is a real need to draw on methods, such as social return on investment, to capture the complexity of the activity. As Schoen et al. (2021) demonstrate, even the smallest community garden can have incredible value: using such an approach, they showed how one in London returned £3 for every £1 invested. In a similar manner to figure 1, social return on investment allows for the often intangible to be captured, which in turn can impact on funding decision, policy support and other key decision-makers helping to sustain urban agricultural practices. Our editorial here illustrates the use of the method within urban greening and agricultural projects, which often focus explicitly on tackling health inequalities within cities. Through social return on investment, we have shown how the approach can capture the complex value and impact of these schemes, particularly with regards to health and wellbeing, whilst conveying these messages to key decision-makers. However, reflections here also highlight the need to adopt rigorous approaches and to also capture the qualitative. In this sense, going beyond mere monetary value to provide a voice to communities, users and other benefactors of these schemes.

Moving Forwards

In this editorial, we aimed to raise awareness around interest in social return on investment within the context of cities and health, alongside encouraging more critical engagement with the approach in the journal. We provided a flavour of its value within urban greening and agricultural initiatives, which have adopted the approach to demonstrate their broad impacts and values. Our case study, and wider reflections, highlighted the need to be cautious of the social return on investment approach adopted, alongside ensuring that empirical evidence forms the brunt of any investigation. Yet, we have also illustrated the outputs from such methodologies and the potential to capture novel activities in ways which would be appealing to decision-makers. We hope this acts as a catalyst for further discussion in the journal and contributes to calls for approaches to evidence 'that supports creative city change and experimentation' (Grant et al., 2017: 5).

We feel that more engagement is particularly important, given the rise in creative approaches to urban health, especially with the upscaling of green social prescribing and other radical developments, such as urban agriculture. Future articles may question the role of social return on investment in advancing such innovations, to revealing more details on the complex value and impacts of practices. Beyond the urban green agenda, there are also questions around social return on investment's wider relevance in promoting sustainable transport and more meta solutions to creating healthier cityscapes. With decision-makers increasingly investing in these areas, discussion on social return on investment as a potential enabler is vital within the agenda of cities and health.

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Social Return on Investment: Reflections on Advancing the Method within Cities & Health

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Abstract
Social return on investment has received attention from a spectrum of disciplinary areas and practitioners. In the post-COVID city, the use of the approach has increased, in part to provide data on green and blue schemes, arts and culture projects, innovative place-making solutions and other such emerging health interventions within the urban context. Given this rise, in this editorial we urge more engagement with the tool amongst submissions to the journal; advancing the evidence base through the methodology to promote creative health and wellbeing solutions within the city. To illustrate the need for such approaches, we focus on urban greening in particular, to provide a case study of the use of the approach and popularity in this burgeoning area. In doing so, we hope to encourage more studies to engage with the method and to enable more effective use of social return on investment in advancing healthier cityscapes.