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Social impact measurement: What can impact investment practices and the policy evaluation paradigm learn from each other?

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, public authorities around the world have fostered an increasing interest for social enterprises and the ways to develop and scale them. Part of this interest has focused on better understanding social enterprises' impact, especially through practices derived from impact investing and philanthropy such as social impact measurement (SIM). This paper looks at the differences between “traditional” policy (or programme evaluation - PE) as it is carried out by public actors and SIM as it is practiced by impact investors and the stakeholders they support (particularly social enterprises), focusing on what can be learnt from these gaps. We take the case of France, where we compare public praxis for both SIM and PE based on a documentary analysis and complementary interviews. We find that both disciplines are bridged by a common theoretical foundation and, to a certain extent, by participative approaches. We also identify three main gaps, which are (i) the way outcomes are treated in PE and SIM; (ii) how stakeholder participation is managed and how it affects the ownership of the evaluation process by the involved parties; and (iii) how metrics and indicators are approached. We assess the benefits and drawbacks associated with each gap, we determine ways to bridge them and we identify five forces contributing to their creation.

1. Introduction: frame and context of this paper

1.1. Context: the place of social enterprises in public management reforms

The development of public management reforms in the last decades, largely influenced by the new public management paradigm (NPM, Hood, 1991), has driven a growing attention on policy or programme¹ evaluation (PE, Dunn and Miller, 2007; Lapsley, 2009). In its quest for introducing management apparatuses inspired from the private sector into public administration, the NPM paradigm argues that evaluation provides the information policy makers need to make better-informed choices, (Dunn and Miller, 2007; Lapsley, 2009).

Several contributions emphasize how public-private partnerships involving social enterprises can contribute to an increased welfare (Albareda et al., 2007; Evers and Laville, 2004). What is a social enterprise remains debated among both academia and practitioners (Dees et al., 1998; Mair and Martí, 2006; Nyssens and Defourny, 2012; Yunus, 2006). However the concept of work integration social enterprise (WISE) offers the benefit of being relatively well and consensually framed. Davister et al. (2004) provide the following definition: “WISEs are autonomous economic entities whose main objective is the professional integration – within the

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¹ This paper focuses on the use of programme evaluation to assess policy outcomes, hence our use of the term ‘policy evaluation’. Programme Evaluation is however the expression most widely used in the literature. Here, we therefore use both terms (and the acronym PE) interchangeably, with an explicit focus on the evaluation of public policy.

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WISE itself or in mainstream enterprises – of people experiencing serious difficulties in the labour market. This integration is achieved through productive activity and tailored follow-up, or through training to qualify the workers”.

Within the NPM paradigm social enterprises appear as a particularly appealing resource from the private sector to leverage in the public sphere for governments seeking potential ways to increase the efficiency of the services to deliver (Hulgård, 2011; Nicholls, 2010; Nyssens and Defourny, 2012; Pestoff, 2008). This is particularly the case for WISEs because of their focus on solving issues such as unemployment, where the public sector is traditionally heavily involved. In this context, social enterprises are progressively being recommended as a key lever for governments to focus on in order to alleviate part of the economic and social challenges they face (European Commission and OECD, 2015; Hulgård, 2011).

This enthusiasm for social enterprises, paralleled with the development of impact investing practices, has led to an increasing focus on social impact measurement (SIM, Emerson, 2003). This trend has first emerged among private actors (philanthropists, social enterprises themselves and impact investors), eager to understand, prove and manage their impact. With the development of impact measurement accelerating in the past few years, a growing number of specialised organisations have emerged (e.g. B Lab, Social Asset Measurements or Sinzer), as well an ever-expanding list of methodologies for SIM (Grieco, 2015; Olsen and Galimidi, 2008). Public authorities have also picked up this infatuation for impact measurement, which happens to be a well-fitted feature for the performance-driven NPM and its focus on evaluation. In this context, we observe an increasing number of attempts to make SIM part of regulatory frameworks aiming to favour the third sector for the provision of certain welfare services (e.g. in 2014 the G8's Social Impact Investment Taskforce or the European Commission's SIM Sub-group – GECES).

In this perspective, it seems relevant to explore the linkages between PE and SIM. The two disciplines seem to yield different approaches on the field, and yet their aim is the same: to assess a given activity or programme in terms of impact. This brings us to our question of understanding what SIM, as an offspring of impact investing practices, can learn from the century-old practice of PE (Hogan, 2010; Scriven, 1996) and vice-versa. While not bringing a definitive answer to this question, this paper proposes to understand the forces driving the differences between SIM and PE, highlighting their associated benefits. We do so by investigating the case of France, looking at how both disciplines are promoted and executed in the public spheres. This research is part of a broader project focused on SIM for work integration social enterprises (WISEs). The SIM and PE approaches studied here are therefore considered in the perspective of an application for WISEs.

1.2. Framing our research: social impact measurement and programme evaluation

1.2.1. Programme evaluation

As highlighted by Pollitt (1993, p.353), “There are many slightly varying definitions of evaluation”. Scriven (1991, p.139) provides a concise definition: “judging the worth or merit of something or the product of the process”. The aspect of “merit or worth” appears central in several other definitions (e.g. Guskey, 1999, p.41; Stufflebeam, 2001, p.11) and comes from the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE)'s *Program Evaluation Standards* (Yarborough et al., 2010). While the field of application of such PEs can be limitless, and because of our interest in WISEs, we will focus on PE methods applicable to initiatives targeting social issues such as unemployment and work integration. This paper therefore adopts the following definition: “Program evaluation is the use of social research methods to systematically investigate the effectiveness of social intervention programmes in ways that are adapted to their political and organizational environments and are designed to inform social action to improve social conditions.” (Rossi et al., 2003, p.16). Other key authors informing our view of PE include Borus (1979); Furubo et al. (2002); Heckman et al. (1999); Imbens and Wooldridge (2009); Levitan and Wurzburg (1979); Poister et al. (1981); Rubin (1973); Scriven (1991) and Stufflebeam (2001).

1.2.2. Social impact measurement

Furthermore, as we are concerned with SIM we will adopt the following definition for what constitutes social impact: “Social impacts include all social and cultural consequences to human populations of any public or private actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to one another, organize to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society” (Burdge and Vanclay, 1995, 59). While we retain this specific definition, we acknowledge the debate in academia and among practitioners around the definition of terms such as “social value”, “social impact”, “social value creation” or “social return” (Austin et al., 2006; Gibbon and Dey, 2011; Maas and Liket, 2011; Nicholls, 2007). The cornerstone of most of the SIM methods developed in the last decades is the impact value chain (Clark et al., 2004), as depicted in Fig. 1. The five stages of the impact value chain cover all the aspects of a programme, starting from the resources used as inputs to the outcomes it creates for the populations taking part in its activities. A key feature of this holistic approach is to differentiate outputs from outcomes, with the latter allowing to identify the programme's contribution to social change. Considerations about the impact value chain are covered extensively in the existing literature (e.g. Clark et al., 2004; Grieco et al., 2015; Maas and Liket, 2011; Olsen and Galimidi, 2008). It is a relatively consensual notion for practitioners and academics alike and therefore constitutes a useful frame of reference for our reflection on SIM.

2. Programme evaluation and social impact measurement: the case of France

2.1. Current evaluation praxis in France: evaluation in the context of the MAP

In order to make our research more relevant to the current discussions, we focus on the most recent PE. After a streak of

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