

Insight into proceeds from social investments: Beyond numbers fetishism and relativism

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¹ International Council on Social Welfare

INSIGHTS INTO PROCEEDS FROM SOCIAL INVESTMENTS

Beyond numbers fetishism and relativism

Research question, goal and structure

The outcomes of many social investments in the Netherlands are hardly known. For example, the effect of the many projects that must foster integration is seldom measured. For this reason, little can be said with certainty about the usefulness of such interventions, as the SCP (2007) states. Even less is known about anti-criminality measures, despite the major role allocated to drive back feelings of unsafety (Wittebrood & Van Beem 2004). In the last 25 years few anti-criminality measures have been evaluated. To name another example, the same applies to the outcome of youth welfare interventions (Boendermaker et al. 2006). Despite the energy that foster parents, ambulatory and residential institutions put – sometimes for years – into children with problems, there is little systematic knowledge available about the outcomes.

This article discusses the evidence-based outcomes of social investments and the possibilities and impossibilities of shedding light into them. There is a resistance among social professionals against this result-oriented approach of social investments – and not entirely without reason. Such an approach could suggest a form of recognisability that does not do justice to the complexity and capriciousness of social relationships and social problems that social professionals encounter in their everyday work. Therefore, on the one hand we argue in this article that it is only partially possible to approach the outcomes of social work and social policy in terms of (quantitative) evidence-based pronouncements. Outcomes of social investments are no mathematical sum.

On the other hand, we argue that social issues can also benefit from an approach that is based on making clear its results – quantitatively or otherwise. Explicating the results of social interventions may offers insight into the differences between successful and unsuccessful interventions, as well as into the reasons that bring these differences about. In any event, the observation that proceeds from social investments are no mathematical sum will not keep subsidising agencies and financiers from setting their priorities. One way or another, they will try to make an estimate of the outcomes of social investments, in terms of content as well as financial aspects. This is why we also argue that it is important for policymakers and social professionals to show, as good as it can get, the concrete results of social investments. Informing subsidising agencies, financiers and policymakers well about these concrete results does not seem to be an inflated prospect.

‘In new neighbourhoods, municipalities slash step-by-step all frills as well as essential public facilities in order to disguise financial mishaps’. That was the header of a recent article about a study into the realisation of Vinex locations.² What is going on? When the drawing plans start making place for the actual construction preparations, public facilities melt away. ‘In nearly all Vinex locations, the add-ons are gradually demolished from the residential district (...). Parks are substantially reduced, playing grounds are not laid, shopping centres are built later and subsidised homes are cancelled

² Planned residential suburban developments in the Netherlands.

(Rengers & Van Uffelen 2006, In: Doorten & Rouw 2006). The classic reasoning hiding behind this is that social facilities only cost money, whereas building homes make a lot of money (see Van der Pennen et al. 2004). But can't social investments in fact save costs? Are the costs for laying down a playing ground in a neighbourhood not lower than the ensuing costs of disturbances caused by potentially delinquent vagrant youth? Different but similar questions are: Is investing in follow-up programs for ex-convicts not cheaper than the costs of criminality that would have arisen without these programs? Aren't the costs for pre-schooling lower than the costs involved in driving back language deficiencies and school drop-outs in latter phases?

In this document we start by discussing the concept of 'social investment'. What do we mean by it? What makes social investments different than the social facilities that are traditionally included in the domain of social policy? We will then proceed to look at the possibilities and impossibilities of giving visibility to the output of social investments, examining the (valuable but limited) possibilities of the evidence-based method. Finally, we will present a weighing framework that can help gain insight into the outcomes of social investments. Both the evidence-based approach and the value-based and practice-based approaches are part of the model. Maybe, some people will characterize the approach in this article as an evidence-based approach. Yet, this is only correct if they refer to an approach that abandons the narrow quantitative conception of 'evidence'. There is 'evidence' in varying degrees and forms. 'Evidence' can originate from randomised and controlled experimental studies, but also from non-experimental descriptive research, as well as from the practical experience of one or more experts (Keijsers & Paulussen 2005). Therefore, we define the approach in this article as a *result-oriented approach*, based on a fairly transparent analysis of practical experiences, value judgements and quantitative as well as qualitative facts and data.

In the background we will always keep into account the subsidising agencies, financiers and policymakers that are responsible for making choices about social policy and establishing substantive and financial priorities, even if they do not have all the information at their disposal. Among the means that they *do* have at their disposal, they *will* make choices. Cancelling social services in new neighbourhoods is one such choice, terminating psychiatric services in prisons is another. But are these choices wise? And if they aren't, how do we show which alternatives are better? The goal of this article is to score gains in this area. Hopefully our observations will prove useful for policymakers, social professionals and social scientists.

Social investments and their proceeds

Social investments can be made the moment that social problems have already manifested themselves, but also in earlier phases, to prevent these problems from surfacing in the first place. In current social policy the emphasis lies on the first type of social investments. We believe that very little energy is deployed into the second type – preventive social investments. In any event, social policy would be positively impulsed if the proceeds of recovery as well as preventive types of social investments became more manifest and transparent.

During the last decennia, the classical view of tasks of social policy is an after-the-fact type of policy: a problem has been observed, mostly in a specific group, and the policy will try to repair that problem. Examples are policy measures aimed at solving unemployment, street vagrancy, drug addictions and loneliness, as well as policy measures aimed at improving the situation of groups like neglected psychiatric patients, persistent truants, single seniors or delinquent youth.

The – apparent – advantage of after-the-fact policy is that it deals with concrete problems that are often visible to everyone, and concrete provisions can be made for them. Such solutions make this type of policy attractive to politicians and policymakers. Policymakers have concrete points of action in society, and get their own focal domain to tackle. Politicians can give clear answers to their constituents. After all, they forcefully deal with visible problems through the necessary measures and services, and if things go well they can also show concrete results. Certainly in times like these, when politicians and policymakers are asked for measurable results, it is tempting to spend more time and attention on after-the-fact policy, like investments in Glenn Mills schools for delinquent youth and in rehabilitation programs for addicts, and all kinds of other investments aimed at fixing problems that are already manifest.

The other side of the coin is that one can lose sight of the fact that social policy can also be before-the-fact policy, which can actually prevent problems. This type of policy has two interconnected elements: it is aimed at adjusting the *social infrastructure* and it can be seen as *preventive policy*.

Before-the-fact policy is thus first and foremost aimed at adjusting the social infrastructure. Engbersen and Sprinkhuizen (1998) define social infrastructure as ‘the entirety of organisations, services, facilities and positions that make it possible in reasonableness in social contexts (neighbourhoods, groups, networks, households) for people to live and be able to participate in society’ (cf. Van Ewijk 2002). This definition shows several things. First, that social infrastructure is qualified as an institutional multiformity – organisations, services, facilities, etc. – that gives people the opportunity to participate in society and enter social relationships. Second, that investments in social infrastructure do not focus on ‘target groups’, but on *all* citizens – black and white, ‘abled’ and disabled, etc. Finally, that institutions that are primarily qualified by functions other than social ones (for instance commercial companies) can radiate important social effects. One example is the role of businesses in a district or a city: their primary function is economic, but the social effects are significant. Neighbourhood shops at walking distance may contribute more to the societal participation of seniors than ‘participation facilities’ especially geared towards them. Another example is laying down a sewage system, for which the entire population is the ‘target group’. A final example is improvement of the accessibility of public transportation: if platforms are raised to meet the height of the wheelchair entrance to the train, *all* citizens can use it. In short, the social infrastructure is much larger than the institutions and facilities that are traditionally included in the domain of social policy and which are aimed at specific groups with specific, already-existing problems (cf. Commissie-Etty 1998; Commissie-Peper 1998).

The second element of before-the-fact policy is, again, that it can be seen as preventive policy. Characteristic of before-the-fact policy is that it can prevent social problems. The sewage system that was set up in every city in the second half of the nineteenth century meant the prevention of mass epidemics. The train, which is accessible to everyone, reduces the chances of social isolation, or in any event the high costs of transportation of the handicapped. In addition, before-the-fact policy is usually accompanied by important side effects. For example, as (favourable) side effect of the new sewage system people no longer left the city *en masse*, travellers and commercial goods from a contaminated area no longer had to be quarantined, and business and industry did not have to risk coming to a halt because of this (De Swaan 1988). Elster (1979) speaks of essentially by-products.

The comparison with the sewage system leads us to discover yet another aspect of preventive social infrastructures: they are often invisible and sometimes unpretentious – to the degree that it seems as if they can be missed. But once they are laid down, they can lead to unimagined dynamics. Preventive social investments are much less concrete than recovery policy, and produce fewer visible results. Now try to show that you have prevented problems by using such policies! Such invisibility makes it less attractive for politicians and policymakers to apply this approach.

To summarise, social investments exhibit two types of proceeds. On the one hand, investments are aimed at solving already-identified, specific social problems (after-the-fact policy). Examples are special facilities for specific groups, such as services for school drop-outs or street addicts. On the other hand, social investments are aimed at adjusting social infrastructure with as (possible) side effect the prevention of social problems (before-the-fact policy). Whereas in the first case the damage is already done and the government has taken special measures to repair the clear deficiencies, before-the-fact policy aims at the infrastructure itself. Its proceeds are reduced chances of social problems occurring in the first place.

Is it possible to measure the proceeds from social investments?

Effective policy requires before-the-fact as well as after-the-fact policy – preventing *and* healing. Few policymakers will deny that. Still, we have the impression that preventive investments in the social domain are neglected. One of the reasons is that it is difficult to show the favourable effects of a thorough, preventive social infrastructure, let alone express them in terms of money. Expenditures in social infrastructure are therefore often seen as costs that weigh heavily on the budget, and less as investments that sooner or later will produce returns. Another reason is that investments in social infrastructure almost always generate effects on more policy terrains, whereas the separate bookkeeping practices of policymakers do not take this calculation into account. Policymakers seem to deal well mainly with costs and profits within their own sector. They seem to deal less well with financial matters across sectors.

In any event, it is necessary for social professionals, together with social scientists, to make the proceeds from social investments clear. As we mentioned, social issues benefit from an approach that is able to explicate its results – evidence-based or otherwise. Furthermore, subsidising agencies and financiers will always set priorities;

within the means available to them they *make choices* – and why wouldn't we help them make the better choices?

But clarifying the (achieved and expected) results of social investments is very important for other reasons too. In the first place, to protect clients who are dependent on social professionals (Knijn 2005). The task facing social work is to realise the conditions for societal participation at the individual and collective levels for those who aren't able to do so on their own. Few people currently see social professionals as 'real' professionals, a qualification generally granted to doctors and lawyers. Social professionals are considered as semi-professionals, or 'quasi-' 'pseudo-' or 'sub-professionals'. 'Their training is shorter, their status is less legitimated, their right to privileged communication is less established, there is less of a specialized body of knowledge, and they have less autonomy from supervision or societal control than "the" professions' (Etzioni, 1969, p. v; see also Johnson, 1972; Macdonald, 1995). It could be said that clients deserve better.

In the second place, for social workers themselves it is extremely important that the proceeds from their social interventions become clearer than they are now. Against the background of the image of social workers as 'semi-professionals', it should surprise nobody that in recent decades they have not been able to effectively resist the unwanted changes in their profession, such as the cutbacks of the 1980s and the one-sided market mentality of the 1990s. Euphemistically formulated, it wouldn't hurt social professionals to contribute to steering the necessary changes for their profession, just like 'real' professionals. This is only possible if the professional group manages to sketch a more realistic picture of the results it has achieved (for a comparison with the care sector, see Verhagen 2005).

The question is, how can the proceeds from social investments be made visible? A much-heard answer – which we can only endorse partially – is using the evidence-based method, in accordance with strict scientific standards. With that method the effects, costs and returns – in other words, the proceeds – of social investments can be shown and even calculated. A major pitfall is to expect too much from (this quantitative type) of the evidence-based method (as mentioned earlier, we start from a less strict approach, giving space to scientifically based evidence as well as practice based evidence (see also next section). It is of course good to do interventions that also work (or seem to work) in practice. Several studies offer valuable results from this perspective (e.g. Andrews et al. 1990; Harder et al. 2006; Polder & Van Vlaardingen 1992). Still, the quantitatively-oriented evidence-based method is not without reproach. Not only is measuring the effect of social investments a time-consuming and costly enterprise, resulting in the impracticality of investigating all (possible) interventions and comparing them; the evidence-based method also presumes a form of recognisability of social problems that does not always do justice to their complexity.

Torenvlied and Akkerman (2005) elaborate on the complexity of social problems – and thus of (evidence-based) social policy – on the basis of the concept of complex intervention logic (see also Doorten & Rouw 2006). The complex intervention logic has four characteristics that ensure that evidence-based knowledge about effects of social investments is lacking or extremely uncertain. The first characteristic is the increased

difficulty of determining policy performance and effects because effects can take a while to become manifest. The distance between measures and effects is large and is obfuscated by many disruptive factors, so that it is hardly possible to ascribe effects to measures. Research conducted by Junger (2006) is maybe an exception. She has conducted evidence-based research into the connection between preschool education and the prevention of antisocial behaviour later in life. This research showed that certain social programs during the early years of life are very important for the social development of children – so important, in fact, that the potential negative results of antisocial behaviour, like criminality, substance use, school drop-out problems and unemployment, can be significantly reduced. This is about long-term effects that can be influenced in the interim by all kinds of factors other than preschool education. To be sure to be able to arrive at reliable conclusions, Junger has isolated these disruptive factors by studying two aselect groups, an experimental and a control group. Nonetheless, it is clear that it is almost impracticable to convincingly isolate *all* possible disruptive factors. Moreover, it is evident that the social sciences will seldom be able to do randomised and controlled trials. Not all social issues lend themselves to such experiments.

A second characteristic of complex intervention logic is that it is assumed that effects (or side effects) occur in issues other than those for which the interventions were primarily intended. Social investments deeply affect cause-consequence relations, so that the effects fan out over several policy areas. School size in the education field is an example. This has been studied by Van der Venne (2006), who looked at the effects of school size on the efficiency and bureaucracy of schools, the quality of the education and the social cohesion within the school. Various American researchers have shown that relatively smaller schools create a safe environment for students and teachers in which they know and trust each other. The percentage of drop-outs is relatively low, the number of graduates higher, and relatively more students continue on to higher education. But what are the effects of small and large schools outside the domain of education? If it turned out, for example, that due to larger (and thus fewer and farther apart) schools students had to bike longer to school and there were more traffic-related deaths, would a choice be made to increase school sizes? Here too it must be remarked that such effects cannot always be investigated.

The third characteristic of complex interventions is that they are aimed at a dynamic reality. Because the interventions deeply affect cause-consequence relations and often sort out effects in the long term, the character of the original question may have changed. The changeability of the problems occur, of course, in all types of interventions, but more so in social investments. Child abuse, for example, is more common than was believed until recently. The scope of the problem seems to have increased,³ hence also that of the many negative effects that can accompany child abuse: drop-out rates, criminality, addiction and mental-health problems, vagrant behaviour,

³ Estimates about the scope of the problem in the Netherlands indicate fifty thousand cases per year up to now. Research points out, however, that the number of children involved is at least twice as high. Van IJzendoorn et al. (2007) found that 100,000 children are abused in the Netherlands. Lamers-Winkelmann et al. (2007) report 160,000 victims. One of the explanations for the found differences is that the researchers used different research methods. IJzendoorn et al. based their figures on cases reported by care workers, Lamers-Winkelmann et al. (2007) arrived at their results on the basis of self-reports of youth.

severe physical conditions, etc. (Johnson et al. 1999; Kendall-Tackett 2000; Filetti et al. 1998; Walker et al. 1999). In fact, not only the scope but also the definition of child abuse has changed in the course of time. This definition has been expanded since the introduction of the Dutch Youth Care Act in 2005. In addition to physical threats and violence, psychological threats and violence are now also part of the definition. It is surprising that this expansion hasn't taken place earlier, but that is not the point we are trying to make. What we care about here is that 'mode' and 'method' (see footnote 3) can be greatly influential to the results of (longitudinal) empirical research. Whereas the effect of an aspirin tablet can be established concretely and permanently, this is not the case for social interventions, among other reasons because the problem that the intervention originally had to solve may have taken on a different character.

A fourth characteristic of the logic of social interventions is that effects are sometimes difficult to observe, namely because such investments are often aimed at the prevention of problems – something that can be prevented cannot be observed. It is thus almost impossible to prove that the non-occurrence of something is the result of a certain intervention. Is the prevention of robberies in public spaces the result of camera surveillance? Is the prevention of soccer hooliganism the result of the deployment of extra police forces? Is the prevention of neighbourhood deterioration the result of social management? Empirical material is often lacking in this area.

We can summarise by saying that the narrow, quantitative conception of evidence-based method is a useful, but at the same time very limited instrument to measure the proceeds from social investments. Striving toward suitable, effective social interventions can never be brought back to an indiscriminate application of evidence-based solutions. More is needed for that, and it will be discussed in the next section.

Measuring, weighing values, and mindful practising in the social domain

The preceding sections show that it is not easy to objectively map out, or even calculate, the proceeds from social investments. But even if it *was* easy, questions will always remain which cannot be expressed in figures or monetary terms. Medical-ethical questions regarding abortion or end-of-life decisions, as well as questions such as the success of upbringing or dealing with troubles caused by vagrant youth are factual as well as normative questions. In other words, the evidence-based method will always have to be accompanied by the value-based method: which values do we use, and what goals do we want to reach?

We now arrive at the domain of moral and political convictions, and the corresponding task for researchers and professionals to make their position in this terrain more explicit. Policymakers will have to do so too, due to their democratic responsibility towards the public. What policymakers can start with is inventorying the different values being significant to them. They can also give arguments to these values, and then indicate which values are most relevant to them. Finally, policymakers can publicly indicate what role their value considerations play in the social interventions that they want to do, and what meaning the available evidence-based information has played in this process. Gladwell (2006) posits, for example, that offering free apartments to the permanently homeless is effective and cheaper than all the shelter and care that is given to this group.

But how can this be reconciled with a possible conviction that people should get ‘what they deserve’? In our view, policymakers should be transparent and open about the decisions they make, regardless whether these decisions are based on objective facts or on value judgements.

A working method that combines evidence-based and value-based insights is necessary when choices have to be made about interventions where both values and facts are in the picture. This is the case in nearly all interventions. We believe that such choices are too often made on a subjective basis, without making the basis for that feeling clearer to the broader public (‘feel-good interventions’). Many interventions would probably be assessed differently if they were researched better, and the government could save a lot of money this way. The risk of feel-good interventions is that they have absolutely no effect and can even end up being counterproductive. The risk is also that no public debate is carried out about the chosen interventions. Citizens not only have a right to effective interventions, but also to insight into the way in which those interventions are prepared and weighed.

Next to evidence-based and value-based methods there is another method that can be deployed when searching for effective social investments, the practice-based method. Working on a practice basis means seeking the best practices from a framework to be tested. That is the immediate, most important difference with evidence-method, which is based on issues that have been proved already. In practice-based method one does mindful practising. The term is used by Mol (2004; 2006), who posits that mindful practising, *dokteren* in Dutch, is not about asking ‘What is the best of these given interventions for this specific person in these specific circumstances?’ – instead, the persons, the circumstances and the interventions are not seen as given, but as changeable. It is not weighing but adjusting which constitutes the core of mindful practising (Mol 2004: 318). Whereas the evidence-based approach is about weighing things beforehand and eventually evaluating afterwards, the practice-based approach is about making adjustments and improvements as one goes along. Mindful practising entails striving towards improvement, without overmanaging and without thinking along a fixed plan. It is that plan, after all, which is under discussion (see also Boutellier & Lünemann 2006). Nevertheless, studying mindful practices systematically can lead to scientific insights: practice based evidence.

Each of the three methods – evidence-, value- and practice-based – has its own logic. Sometimes they complement each other, sometimes they clash. The logic of an evidence-based approach is rational and aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of social investments. Is it possible to show effects of interventions? That’s a typical question that fits this logic. Another question is: are there disruptive factors? The logic of the value-based approach is moral and is based on the assumption that social interventions are intrinsically value driven. Value considerations are made here. For example: How can we categorise and prioritize the proceeds from social investments, given the values that we use? The logic of the practice-based approach is relational. Whereas evidence-based research requires the variables that are to be calculated to be ‘fixed’, the practice-based approach assumes that social variables *cannot* (always) be fixed. Characteristic of social variables is precisely that they cannot be seen as certain, but are changeable. Questions that fit the practice-based approach

are: How can we search for and get a sense of interventions that have positive effects on the chosen goals? And: Is the chosen goal, on further consideration, the most suitable one to aim for anyway?

If one is to give a realistic and useful insight into the proceeds from social investments, the evidence-, value- and practice-based methods will have to be combined. Each of the three methods has specific advantages and disadvantages:

- Although the evidence-based approach does not always do sufficient justice to the complex social reality with multiple and disruptive effects, this approach offers a quantifiable frame of reference that the value-based and practice-based approaches lack.
- Although the value-based approach can lead to making the role of values in policy absolute, leaving no room for the rationality, reality and evidence of costs and benefits, the value-based approach nonetheless offers space to involve relevant non-quantifiable units in policy decisions.
- Although the practice-based approach must use comparative casuistry, which can hinder the realisation of deeper, more structural insights into social problems, one advantage of this approach is that it does allow for discussing the tenability of apparently superior methods and goals. After all, the core business of the practice-based approach is further improvement.

We believe that finding the right balance between the evidence-, value- and practice-based approaches is all about being as transparent as possible about the used combination of approaches and about the realised or expected results. That is a complex task, without a method blueprint and without a guarantee of success. Still, in our opinion this task produces more than showing all the cards for the realisation of (randomised and controlled) evidence-based effect studies. Putting everything there would constitute numbers fetishism. Besides, our proposed task is more productive than going along with one-sided proponents of a value- or practice-based approach, who claim that *any* attempt to substantiate the proceeds from social investments through evidence-based facts would be senseless. This would entail numbers relativism.

In sum: effective social investments are not investments in which all results are evaluated afterwards (evidence-based) and all values weighed beforehand (value-based) exclusively. Effective investments are those which also offer space to fiddle around and experiment (practice-based), although these experiments have to be analysed carefully – mindfully and reflectively – for purposes of further improvement. Only through factual, value and practical considerations can justice be done to complex intervention logic, and a useful and realistic picture can be sketched of the (expected) proceeds from social investments. Not an easy task, but this makes it all the more relevant.

Conclusion

The above shows that it is not easy to map out or even calculate the (evidence-based) proceeds from social investments. This is due to complex intervention logic. Complexity manifests itself in the form of disruptive factors, side effects in different policy terrains, the changeability of problems over the long term, and the difficulty of observing effects because social investments often aim at preventing problems. The

possibilities of the (strictly scientific) evidence-based method are valuable but limited; societal issues are often not open enough to become clear through evidence-based objectification. Just like societal questions usually deal with norms, values and ideals, research and policy decisions rest on objective facts as well as value judgements.

Making a combined weighing of facts and values makes taking a well-considered decision not less relevant but more complex instead. To face up to this complexity a third type of consideration is needed: 'mindful practising', that is, searching for and getting a feel for ways to deal with the complexity of social reality and the related research. Mindful practising involves striving towards improvement without a static end goal. That goal is, after all, under discussion, even though it may have appeared rather self-evident in the beginning. We have shown that it would be best to do mindful practising without making it an all-decisive process but giving it the necessary space.

In short, we believe that the most important task when clarifying proceeds from social investments is to smartly take into account facts, values and practices in research, and to be transparent about the choices made. Combining evidence-, value- and practice-based methods is a complex task, without guarantees of success. Still, in our view it is more realistic than numbers fetishism and more useful than the numbers relativism that is imposed on social policymakers nowadays.

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