

How (not) to evaluate the social economy.

**Graham Haughton,
Department of Geography
University of Hull**

Abstract

This paper takes a look at the research challenges set out by the rapid rise of UK policy interest in using social enterprises to help deliver various aspects of public policy. The article will focus particularly on the challenges faced by researchers seeking to address the expectations of evidence-based policy in this area.

First, there are conceptual challenges still surrounding the definition of the social economy and social enterprise which make efforts to assess the size of the sector nationally problematic.

Secondly, within the sector itself there is pressure to identify and compare the types of 'value added' by different types of social enterprise, which again bring conceptual and methodological challenges for the researcher. The article concludes that we are in danger of losing sight of the very features of the sector which currently provides its identity in searching for common metrics to meet the policy imperative to measure, assess, reward and punish according to centrally set criteria and objectives. In other words, we expect social economy to be amenable to national evaluation measures, but there is a tension here with the expectation that the sector should be distinctive and different in, for instance, meeting local needs using local resources, adopting non mainstream approaches, which might be 'alternative' or otherwise distinctive.