

# **Social value in Equity Housing Group's supply chain: exploring assumptions using Action Research**

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## **Abstract**

This working paper explores the potential of Action Research (AR) to deliver sustainable social outcomes in Equity Housing Group's (EHG) supply chain. EHG is a social housing organisation in the North West of England. EHG use supply chain levies in major contracts, based on contract values. Monies raised through supplier levies are used to fund diverse community initiatives. The intended and unintended consequences of these procurement mechanisms on a range of stakeholders require exploration. This paper evaluates how AR can challenge the assumed principles of social value and sustainable procurement in practice.

**Keywords:** Social Value, Public Procurement, Action Research

## **Introduction**

Social value is high on the political agenda and the UK government has introduced legislation to “ensure that the full weight of the public sector’s purchasing power is directed at achieving social and environmental benefits alongside financial efficiency” (Social Enterprise UK, 2012p3). The Public Services (Social Value) Act (2012) (HM Government, 2012) requires public bodies to consider how the services they procure can improve the local economic, social and environmental well being, either directly through contractual criteria, or indirectly through engaging third sector organisations in the supply chain (Dayson, 2013). Procurement contributes to the sustainability agenda through creating, developing, controlling and maintaining supply chain behaviour (Hassini et al., 2012), yet there is limited research on sustainable public procurement (Walker and Brammer, 2012), and procurement mechanisms to deliver social value.

This research is part of a wider three-year funded study to explore the emerging role of social value in social housing. Equity Housing Group (EHG), a UK-based social housing provider, and their end-to-end supply chain, provide the empirical focus. Currently, EHG draws upstream social value from its supply chain through financial contractual levies, whereby high spend suppliers pay a social value tax based on the contract value. The Equity Foundation disperses these monies downstream, along with other direct fundraising revenues, via grant funding to community enterprises and initiatives (Equity Foundation, n.d.). The project is in the research design phase and data collection is due to start in the second quarter of 2016.

This working paper evaluates how action research (AR) can challenge the assumed principles of social value and sustainable procurement in practice. Key questions centre on whether existing supply chain approaches to social value are sufficient for emancipatory change, or if they reinforce the status quo and maintain current power structures? Issues of equity, poverty, social mobility and opportunity require a deeper assessment of the unintended consequences of distributive levies, as experienced from a range of stakeholders. AR is assessed for its potential to probe counter-narratives to the more dominant versions of policy impacts, which tend to focus only on the positive aspects of social value (Cabinet Office, 2015), or on monetization of interventions (Fujiwara, 2013); neither of which situations sit comfortably in a social housing context.

#### *Empirical context: The UK social housing sector*

The UK social housing sector has approximately 1,500 Housing Associations (HA) who provide circa 2.7M affordable homes for rent. Local authorities traditionally managed the social housing sector through council housing provision. Policy changes over the last decade resulted in many councils selling municipal housing stock to registered providers; these HAs now provide the majority of UK social housing and most operate with a charitable organisational status (Gibb and Nygaard, 2006), providing societal benefits, and tax efficient structures (Reeves, 2014).

HAs straddle the public and private sectors. Although technically outside of the public sector, social housing is government-regulated, operates under central government's housing and welfare policy, and two-thirds of the sectors' rental income is generated from government-controlled Housing Benefit (Laffin, 2013). UK HAs are also bound by EU procurement directives, including the Public Services (Social Value) Act (2013), (hereafter called the Social Value Act). With regards to commercial enterprise, many HAs now offer revenue-generating services to external markets (through separate trading arms to protect their charitable status) enabling profits to be reinvested into their communities and/or housing stock (Meehan et al., 2015).

The sector is economically important in the UK. In 2014, the sector's gross book value of assets was circa £132.7 billion, and expenditure was £9.2 billion (Homes & Communities Agency, 2015), which was dominated by local supply chains (Dayson et al., 2013). The economic inter-dependence of local suppliers, contractors and HAs creates high risks to local employment and business growth. The turbulent policy environment for HAs under the radical welfare reforms demonstrates the fragility of sustained economic performance, particularly as current procurement performance is perceived as suboptimal (Meehan and Bryde, 2015).

Social sustainability is influenced by the built environment at a neighbourhood and community level (Bramley and Power, 2009), yet issues of social equity and access to

groups and networks is not always distributed equitably within communities (Dempsey et al., 2011). HAs play a pivotal role in the sustainability agenda (Meehan and Bryde, 2014) through connecting environmental impact, local economic stimulation, social justice and wellbeing. Improving social value is a core philosophy of many HAs, evidenced through the broad range of their activities including issues of community, crime, regeneration, health, employment and education (Monk et al., 2010). Despite the universal acceptance of the positive intention of social value, in practice the complexities create a significant challenge and have the potential to create unintended consequences. In the case of EHG, using procurement as a mechanism to raise and distribute socio-economic levies without consideration of the assumptions made, can reinforce and create sub-optimal or damaging socio-economic legacies.

### *Action Research*

EHG and their supply networks provide the empirical focus of a longitudinal (three year) action based case study to explore the impacts of social value approaches. The senior management team and EHG board want to gain a better understanding of their policy impacts, and approached the research team in 2015. Social value is a foundation of EHG's strategy and culture but despite many publicised successes the sustainability of their social value agenda has never been challenged. Following a series of discussions, presentations and meetings with EHG's CEO, board members, the Procurement Manager, Equity Foundation coordinator, tenant representatives, and the Executive Director of Corporate Development, a three-year PhD project was agreed, funded by EHG. Action research methodologies were favoured to enable iterative change and deep participation with staff, suppliers, contractors, tenants and community groups. The broad aim of the research is to understand social value from a range of perspectives to improve procurement (and other) mechanisms to deliver sustainable, positive impact.

AR is a generic term covering many variations of action-orientated research that provide practical and theoretical outcomes (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002). AR is problem centered (Sanford, 1970) and is research 'in' action, rather than research 'about' action (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002). The focus for AR tends towards the resolution of important social or organisational issues (for example, social value), rather than superficial or simple problems. The complexity increases the affect and impact on diverse stakeholders, necessitating participatory approaches.

A critical approach is required in this project as the conceptual and contextual boundaries of social value, and its iterative impacts on a range of stakeholders, are unclear (Yin, 1994). The EHG case is instrumental as it aims to provide deeper insight into social value across a broad network of groups, organisations and individuals (Flyvbjerg, 2006, Stake, 1995). Participatory approaches allow issues to be seen from different perspectives. Participant involvement is dialogic raising the consciousness of all involved in the research, as it aims to transform as well as predict and control (Saunders et al., 2009). Challenging assumptions using participatory, critical approaches can provide an important source of social understanding and a much-needed impetus for social and political changes (Fay, 1987). The social housing sector deals with communities frequently entrenched with social disadvantage and exclusion (Pawson and Kintrea, 2002), making the need for equitable participation potentially more important, yet more difficult in practice to implement.

The process for AR involves engagement with those directly or indirectly impacted using cyclical steps of planning, taking action, and evaluating action leading to further

planning (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002). The involvement of members of the system in the full iterative cycles of planning-action-review, as opposed to purely gathering data from participants differentiates AR from other forms of research. The approach is action-oriented but necessitates an incremental approach moving from the particular to the general in small steps (Eden and Huxham, 1996).

The next section outlines the current academic and policy landscape of social value. The remainder of this working paper explores the potential for AR to challenge the assumptions made in EHG's use of supply chain levies to deliver social value. The practical difficulties faced in using AR are discussed to draw out a series of operational challenges in relation to the research design.

#### *Social value*

The Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 requires public authorities in England and Wales to consider how the services they commission and procure can improve the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the communities served (HM Government, 2012). The actual obligations of the social value legislation are limited by financial thresholds, although all contracts are encouraged to consider social value (Cabinet Office, 2012). The Social Value Act encourages decision makers in the procurement and commissioning process to consider wider aggregate benefits to communities, beyond cost considerations (Harlock, 2014). This is not to suggest that cost is not important; rather there is an implied recognition that positive social interventions whether related to health, education or employment, can reduce the longer-term costs to the public purse. The operationalization of such a diverse concept as social value is problematic (Arvidson and Kara, 2013, Social Enterprise UK, 2012, Teasdale et al., 2012), and there are concerns on the evidence provided by suppliers and contracts, on which service and social value effectiveness is assessed (Harlock, 2014). Although the Social Value Act is new, there is still limited academic research on its impact, and early reviews suggest awareness and understanding is low (Cabinet Office, 2014, Social Enterprise UK, 2014).

Social housing organisations, and other public authorities, face a procurement challenge on how to balance social value with often-conflicting goals and priorities centred on cost reduction and supply chain rationalisation (Arvidson and Kara, 2013). The paucity of empirical and academic evidence around social value creates a reticence to move from consideration to implementation, as the risks of failure can be high, particularly when faced with conflicting commercial pressures. The other potential course of action tends towards mimetic isomorphic approaches (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), with organisations mimicking others' approaches in the sector, assuming perhaps that these have been robustly assessed for sustainable impact, or at least providing legitimacy of use.

As the social value field is in its infancy there is a pressing need to build an evidence base of scholarly research to assess the effect of social and economic value for a range of stakeholders, and to identify appropriate solutions to balance cost and social considerations to maximise supply chain outcomes. AR could play an important role in understanding the social value landscape, as perceived by a range of stakeholders as it provides an approach that is dialogical, participatory (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002), and change-oriented to deal with multi-faceted issues (Linton et al., 2007).

Despite the lack of empirical evidence, public authorities have been keen to promote the positive results of the Social Value Act in service contracts, including the use of diversity employment targets in contracts let by the Olympic Delivery Authority for the London

Olympics (Wright, 2015) and a number of contracts let by social housing organisations (Cabinet Office, 2014, Macfarlane and LLP, 2014). The stated ‘good practice’ reported tends towards tick-box targets, rather than a deep analysis that evidences emancipatory change, social mobility or sustained impact. The Social Value Act can drive the ethical basis and effects of commissioning and procurements decisions (Frith, 2014). Managing procurement relationships is important to ensure the rhetoric of the procurement process is reflected in organisations’ operations and contractual performance (Meehan and Bryde, 2015). Public procurement requires extensive engagement with suppliers, pre and post contract, and with beneficiaries to assess social value. Deeper, holistic value may be delivered through contract mechanisms; the issue here is the lack of empirical evidence and engaged research methods to understand adverse, as well as favourable outcomes.

### *Challenge 1: Designing the research*

The social value agenda is nascent in the academic literature and at the periphery for many organisations (Kinderman, 2012). The lack of core positioning of social value is, in part, owing to a research and policy agenda centred on public services and third sector commissioning rather than a wider mainstream acceptance of these approaches, particularly in the private sector (Dayson, 2013). The Social Value Act shifts responsibility for change upstream into the supply chain, suggesting that suppliers need to provide greater contribution to societal problems experienced by HAs and potentially moving this to a core activity for suppliers.

EHG (and other HAs and procurement consortia in the sector) reiterate this shift in duty to suppliers through their use of social value levies, based on contract values (Marguet et al., 2009), essentially adding a tax to large contracts to fund a variety of downstream social, employment or community initiatives. It is unclear if levies distribute wealth in the supply chain from private sector suppliers to communities, or whether suppliers simply add these costs on their prices and the costs are borne by the taxpayer. The Social Value Act attempts to encourage the use of third sector organisations in the supply chain. Another challenge is whether these levies are equally applied to these suppliers, and if that creates tensions in reducing surplus from one charitable organisation to fund others downstream in the supply chain.

Participatory and longitudinal research methods are needed to unpick the consequences, intended and unintended, of these approaches, including understanding commercial reactions by suppliers to social value levies and clauses in major contracts. Critically, it is unresolved who assesses value, and over what timeframe, or how social value can be specified, encouraged and monitored contractually within the supply chain. Filling these gaps is important, as creating societal value is arguably one of the most powerful forces driving global economic growth (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

A practical challenge faced when embarking on AR is the fluidity of research scope. Specifically for the research with EHG, AR a fundamental question is who is in and who is out of scope. Social value by its nature assumes a broad impact across society and communities, and the supply chain context of the research extends impacts further upstream. Sustainable procurement shifts the dynamic from managing the network to being able to influence it (Meehan and Bryde, 2015), which although a subtle change, amplifies issues in scoping the research design as decision makers, providers, funders and recipients of social initiatives are dispersed through a complex network.

An added complication is the role of research ethics. Higher Education Institutes have to provide ethical approval to researchers prior to data collection. AR projects are emergent, and while the process can be anticipated, it cannot be designed or planned in detail, making ethical applications either generic and vague, or overly cautious and detailed covering every possible research direction. The nature of social housing and social value increases the possibilities of researching vulnerable groups, making ethical clearance a particularly sensitive issue.

### *Challenge 2: Representative diversity*

An AR approach is considered appropriate to understand the consequences of sustainable procurement, as experienced by a range of stakeholders including non-direct and fringe actors. The challenge is deciding what outcomes matter, and to who, and how (or if) these can be measured in contractual terms. These are challenges for social housing organisations, particular given restrictions on resource allocation and an increasingly difficult policy environment (Fujiwara, 2013), where conflicting pressures may skew, or narrow, how the research problem is situated. A benefit of AR is the ability to generate emergent theories developed from the data, change, and assessment over time (Eden and Huxham, 1996). For social value, this is useful as the changes implemented allow a systems perspective to be taken, allowing sub-optimisations or unintended consequences to be captured. The temporal dimension of social value specifically, and sustainability more generally, is well suited to AR as it cycles through various stages and iterations of change. Sustainable social change is unlikely to have direct causal relationships given the high interdependencies between issues. Thus, a longitudinal approach that incrementally adapts and diffuses, like AR, is preferable.

Housing is implicitly rooted to sustainability and is a basic human need alongside food, clothing, medical care and social services (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). Traditional measures of social value and wellbeing in housing therefore tend to be housing-related, typically covering space, noise, housing conditions and the external local environment, in line with the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) measures (Barnes et al., 2011, Fujiwara, 2013). A popular measure of social value in the social housing sector is the HACT model that attempts to provide a financial value on the social impact of housing and also non-housing related activities (Trotter et al., 2014), including new house building (under a range of ownership schemes), asset management and community investment programmes (Fujiwara, 2013). The HACT model assigns financial values to an extensive range of activities allowing housing organisations to compare the impact of building more social houses, with investing directly in community schemes for example to enable decision making to be optimised, albeit using proxy values of social cost.

Sustainable social outcomes related to social housing communities cover equity, poverty, social mobility and opportunity, some of which are non-tangible and difficult to quantify using financial value measures. These issues require deeper assessments that are fully understood from the perspectives of all stakeholders in the supply chain. Implicit in this challenge is ensuring representative diversity in the AR process. Social housing tenants can represent traditional hard-to-reach groups (Shaw et al., 1996). Many housing associations have tenant groups, yet it is important that these represent the diversity of the communities, particularly those who do not currently have a ‘voice’.

Keeping participants engaged through the life of the project is a challenge in any longitudinal research. With AR participation comes a host of additional responsibilities; not

just in terms of effort and time required by those involved in the research, but in terms of managing expectations and potential changes over time to power structures. Involvement in AR is not a method to provide a shopping list of requests, although this could be perceived as such by some stakeholders. The involvement of parties with specific, personal interests, and its focus on implementing change, requires significant reflection, communication, and challenge to ensure equity. Arnstein's Ladder (Arnstein, 1969), is a approach originally designed to provoke a challenge to citizen involvement in planning in the USA. The hierarchical 'ladder' moves through two stages of non-participation (manipulation and therapy), through three stages of 'tokenism' (informing, consultation and placation) to three stages of citizen power (partnership, delegated power and citizen control). AR uses highly interactive methods at the higher end of the ladder, combined with responsive change and reflection; an issue here is ensuring changes are truly representative, equitable and not used opportunistically. How action researchers select participants, communicate with them and assess changes is critical to ensure results are robust and fair.

### *Challenge 3: Trade-offs and tensions*

AR is a challenging approach because it requires confident and experienced researchers to cope with the uncertainty of the unfolding story. There is a move in the social value arena to measure impact, with HACT (Fujiwara, 2013, Trotter et al., 2014), and Social Return of Investment (SROI) (New Economics Foundation, 2004), being particularly prominent in the UK social housing sector.

Metrics for social value serve three different tasks; providing funders or investors with data on impact; providing a tool for organisations to manage their own choices internally; and the need to better understand long term processes of social change and impact. Although these purposes overlap, it indicates that any one metric cannot do all three of these tasks simultaneously and creates conflict of interest between different stakeholders. Attributing financial costs to social outcomes is useful in providing consistency and is arguably a common language of understanding. However, when dealing with emotive, social issues, including poverty, health, educative, crime and social cohesion, some stakeholders can view costs as an inappropriate indicator. Cost benefit analysis can help organisations choose between complex courses of action, but it does presume a homogeneity of value on a singular scale (Nussbaum, 2000), and tends towards a company-centric view of value, rather than a broader engaged perspective representing a range of stakeholders. The use of a broader unit of assessment, as experienced in AR, across supply networks and communities moves the focus of understanding away from narrow company-centric internal initiatives (Touboulic and Walker, 2016), to views as experienced by a range of stakeholders including non-direct and fringe actors.

AR's emergent properties risks creating tensions with the sponsoring organisation as the research may follow a different trajectory than anticipated. AR can further social action by organising people around tasks, defining problems and finding facts in such a way that the research itself becomes a form of empowerment and action (Palmer and Jacobsen, 1974). Although change is generally in smaller phased cycles (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002, Eden and Huxham, 1996) that allows for discussion and control, the funding organisation for the research remains the primary decision maker. Conflicts between optimisations for different stakeholder groups could shake the power structures of supply chains if there are true emancipatory freedoms given to make changes. The likelihood of this is difficult to assess but if not in the organisation's interest, it may see a tighter reign on the project scope.

### *Conclusions*

AR has potential to contribute understanding and change to the complex issues of sustainability covering inputs, outputs, trade-offs, networks, stakeholder relationships and viability. Despite these issues being core dimensions of operations and supply chain management, AR is still underrepresented as a method in contemporary operations and supply chain research (Baker and Jayaraman, 2012, Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002, Näslund et al., 2010, Touboulic and Walker, 2016). The relevance of AR increases as complex issues like sustainability and social value grow (Boyer and Swink, 2008). This working paper has explored the potential contributions of AR to ask different questions of social sustainability; and in doing so, exposes tensions in its use.

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