# How can we up-skill charities to gain insights from data?

By Louise Corti & Neil Serougi on 2 March 2018

For many charities, the past decade has been a difficult time in more sense than one. So it's no surprise that doing more with less, and keeping pace with heightened expectations, have become major challenges for trustee boards and management teams.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) **UK Data Service of Essex and Manchester Universities** recently hosted an event designed to explore how civil society organisations might use innovative data methods and tools to increase impact.

The day looked at opportunities and challenges for professionals working with administrative, monitoring or evaluation data, including hands-on training in open source data visualisation software.

Engagement on the day showed just how much appetite there is for charities to be better able to get insights from data in order to understand and improve their impact.

We ended up with participants from a wide range of charities and civil society organisations, from Asthma UK to Scope, The Salvation Army to Crisis, NCVO to NPC, and non-departmental public bodies, including Historic England too.

Bringing their own expertise to the table, those present showed a strong understanding of where data could be used productively to increase the impact of their own organisations.

So the desire is there. With many, it's merely a question of building skills and capacity.

*Participants engaging in the practical session at the event*

## If charities are engaged, how can we build their skills?

The notion of building data capacity and capability in civil society has been talked about in policy circles for at least ten years. Events like this show that the appetite for just such a project remains strong. What's more, the existence of the talent to respond is there.

So what comes next?

We can already see the benefits of work done by organisations brokering links with charities to help progress impact through data. NPC has a number of **how-to resources** and **events**. And **DataKind** makes use of evening and weekend events to provide support in an agile way—bringing together skilled pro bono data scientists with leading social change organisations to collaborate on cutting-edge analytics and advanced algorithms to maximise social impact.

A concerted effort by those involved in research institutions and data-savvy organisations would be welcome. We'd like to see them creating opportunities to help **develop infrastructure and information cultures** upon which we can achieve real transformation in evidence-based impact.

Academia has been slower to scale up its efforts to impart its great research and data knowledge. Often it relies on smaller ad hoc funding research opportunities to partner with civil society organisations. Academia would benefit from a tighter network, especially if the benefits of such events as ours are to be realised at scale.

Both universities and funding organisations—where an abundance of skills exists—could take a lead in this respect to help 'upskill' local organisations. This needn't be one-dimensional either. The different aspects presented at our event on helping 'unlock' impact demonstrate the scope at which this could take place—perhaps by focusing on core themes that have resonance with charities, such as pooling intelligence on pressing social issues.

Charities tend to be data rich across a number of mediums, but struggle to exploit the assets to their full potential. If our event demonstrated one fact in particular, it was that if we get this right, the opportunities for mutual benefit as well as wider societal value are immense.

**See NPC's guide on turning data into insights.**

By Louise Corti & Neil Serougi

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