



GOVERNMENT
OUTCOMES
LAB

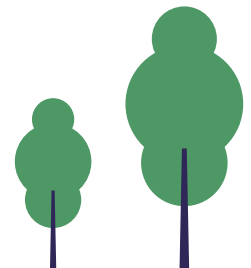
The first five years

Growing knowledge and improving practice in cross-sector
partnerships for better social outcomes

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September 2021



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Foreword

In the coming years, governments across the world face a huge challenge. As they look to build back better following a gruelling pandemic, calls are growing for them to do so in a way that supports those who have traditionally been left out of wider societal progress. But governments cannot meet this challenge alone. They will need to forge effective partnerships with the private sector, with charities, and with local communities.

The Government Outcomes Lab at the Blavatnik School of Government has been looking at how government can foster effective cross-sector partnerships for the last five years. Its researchers have walked shoulder to shoulder with governments at all levels as they have explored innovative ways to improve social outcomes, evaluating those efforts and ensuring that we can all learn from them. The knowledge built holds powerful lessons on how governments can improve their partnerships.

The lessons need to be enduring. We are aware that too often within government, as politicians and officials change, lessons are lost. But we bring the permanence and independence of the University to our partnership with government and to the task of analysing and then carrying forward lessons learned, as well as sharing them with others around the world. We see ourselves as a repository of knowledge, and a hub of learning.

The Government Outcomes Lab combines its rigorous, independent and internationally relevant research with practical engagement and teaching. Our capacity-building courses, peer learning groups and online tools serve people in all sectors seeking to partner better. This diverse set of activities



Professor Ngaire Woods
Dean of the Blavatnik School of Government
University of Oxford

serves as a demonstration of how a close connection between universities and governments can help governments to do better, and help to improve social outcomes for the people they exist to serve.

We are very proud to celebrate the Government Outcomes Lab's first five years in this report. Many people have been an integral part of the Lab's success to date, most notably our partners in the UK government, whose support has been essential to sustaining much of our core activity. I hope you enjoy reading about our story, our achievements, and the lessons we have learned along the way.



Message from our leadership team

2021 marks the fifth anniversary of the Government Outcomes Lab. This report reflects on our key achievements over the first five years, which have firmly established the GO Lab as a trusted, authoritative global centre of knowledge on cross-sector partnerships for better social outcomes. This report summarises our journey, challenges and triumphs, and provides an opportunity to reiterate our core principles.

The GO Lab began in 2016 as a partnership between the Blavatnik School of Government and the UK Government’s then Office for Civil Society. We’ve come a long way since then. Our ever-growing team has produced original research, equipped decision makers with evidence, and provided people working on the ground with useful tools to design and manage projects. Alongside governments, other academic institutions, and a wide range of related organisations, we have been able to harness invaluable skills and insights to enhance policy and practice.



We have benefited from a variety of international partners and funders throughout the last five years, including research councils, governments and philanthropies. Our partners in the UK government’s civil society directorate deserve particular mention, having stayed the course as our champions and core funders throughout this period, despite the many disruptions affecting the government.

Looking to the future, we will strive to continue to nurture our global network around cross-sector partnerships for better social outcomes. As we do this, we commit to provide balanced, clear and open expertise for those seeking to tackle complex social issues.

We would like to thank all of our partners and stakeholders for supporting and believing in us over the past five years, and we look forward to your continued engagement and support. We are incredibly proud of what we have accomplished, and we appreciate the role played by a broad range of people in this success. Our progress depends on these valuable partnerships across sectors.



Mara Airoidi
Academic
Director



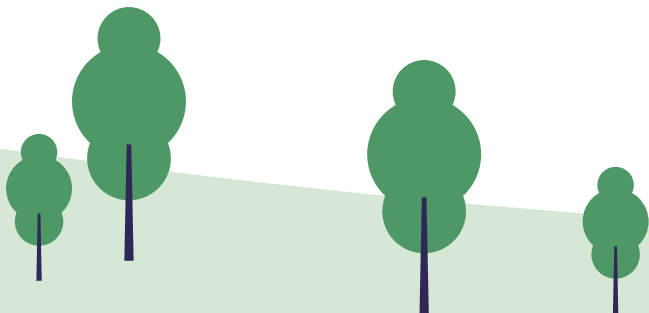
Nigel Ball
Executive
Director



Eleanor Carter
Research
Director



Andreea Anastasiu
Policy and
Engagement
Manager



Our approach

Our role as engaged researchers

Governments have a tough job. They are faced with a moral and political imperative to improve social outcomes, especially for society's most disadvantaged groups. But there are few easy solutions, and limited resources with which to deliver them. Academic research has uncovered a range of rich insights that might help, but these rarely make it onto the radar of those in government. That means they often fail to influence policy and practice.

At the Government Outcomes Lab, we take a different approach. From our inception, we've tried to blend rigorous research with practical engagement, bridging the divide that too often exists between those who generate knowledge and those who use it. We pride ourselves on fostering a dialogue that ensures the research we undertake is both academically relevant and responsive to the needs of policy and practice. We also work hard to get evidence into the hands of those who need it, through an expansive and multifaceted programme of engagement and capacity-building on both a national and international level.

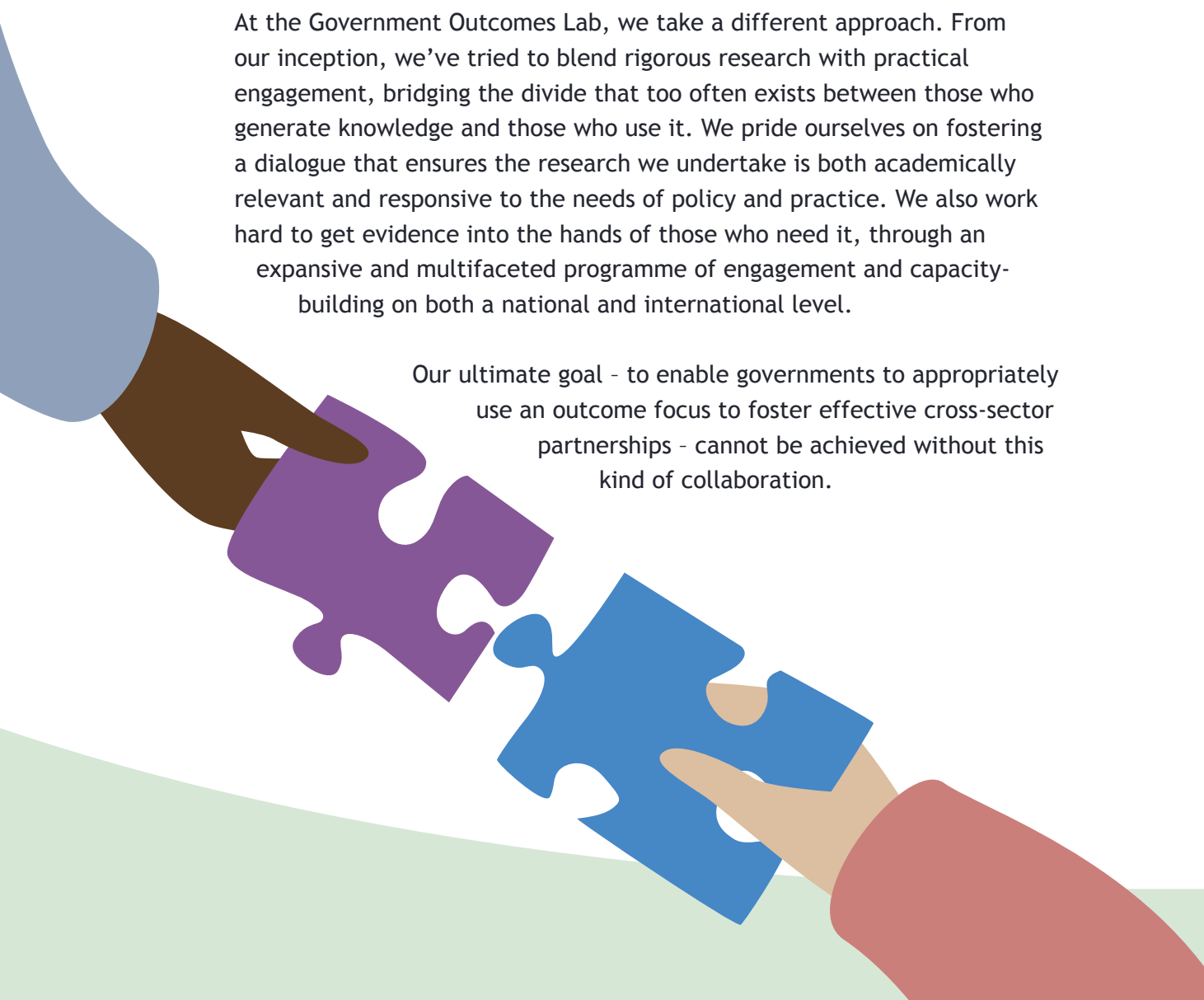
Our ultimate goal - to enable governments to appropriately use an outcome focus to foster effective cross-sector partnerships - cannot be achieved without this kind of collaboration.

The foundation of our work is high-quality research, and our team of multi-disciplinary researchers bring stellar academic credentials, as well as a desire to generate useful practical insights. We adopt an interdisciplinary approach to investigate government's role in unlocking fruitful cross-sector partnerships to improve social outcomes. Using qualitative, quantitative and economic analysis, we aim to shed light on what might make various partnership approaches effective, and how they compare to one another, responding to the questions posed by people working 'on the ground' or in government policy.

By publishing in prestigious academic journals (in addition to policy-facing reports and online guidance), we maintain a strong academic grounding that means our insights have met the highest standards of evidence, so those using them to inform real-world decisions can rely on them. Our academic publications also help us to build a research community around the questions that are most practically salient, meaning our work can leverage research assets in other universities around the world as we continue to grow the evidence base.

Attracting world-leading scholars

Many leaders in their fields have contributed to the GO Lab's work. Professor Stéphane Saussier of Sorbonne Business School joins the GO Lab for 2021. Prof Saussier brings an in-depth understanding of how long-term infrastructure and utility contracts have been used, and will investigate how this compares with contracts aimed at improving social outcomes, particularly around the importance of trust and flexibility in accommodating changing needs. We look forward to welcoming Prof Carolyn Heinrich (Vanderbilt University) to a visitorship soon as well. Carolyn is a member of our Scientific Advisory Board along with Profs Mildred Warner (Cornell), Julian Le Grand (LSE), and Gwyn Bevan (LSE). Our annual conference has welcomed names such as Profs David Van Slyke (Syracuse), Alnoor Ebrahim (Tufts) and Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz (Columbia), as well as wider Blavatnik School faculty such as Profs Stefan Dercon, Jo Wolff and Karthik Ramanna.



But our work doesn't stop once the research is done. We know that simply producing the evidence is not enough - we want to make sure that those designing, developing and implementing innovative approaches to tackling complex social problems can make use of our insights. Busy decision-makers rarely have the time to read the many reports and academic articles that are produced every year, let alone think through how abstract conclusions might inform their work. In our own research assets, we highlight the key findings and what they might mean for practice, as well as synthesising the broader body of academic work into more accessible formats.

We also host regular webinars, workshops and events, online and in-person, to discuss key topics and facilitate networking with sector experts. In just five years, we have built a community of engaged practitioners, policymakers and researchers interested in data, public procurement, measurement, outcomes-based approaches and more, through our peer learning networks and executive education programmes.

Balancing our dual roles is not always easy, and we've encountered our fair share of challenges along the way. But we know that it makes a real difference to the outcomes that governments can achieve, by enhancing both the quality of our research and the impact it has on policy and practice.



Applying Cultural Theory to cross-sector partnerships

A good example of how our work caters to both practice and academic audiences can be found in GO Lab Research Fellow Dr Ruth Dixon's work applying Cultural Theory to social impact bonds

(SIBs). In September 2018, she published a piece exploring the subject on the LSE British Politics and Policy Blog and later presented it at the Political Studies Association's 2019 annual conference. Following this, her work was published in September 2020 as *Performance management in social impact bonds: how an outcomes-based approach shapes hybrid partnerships* in The International Journal of Public Sector Management. The paper is available for all to read via open-access.

The research has also been presented to both local and central government audiences, who found it to be a "fascinating" new perspective on SIBs.



“ Our partnership with the Government Outcomes Lab is a really unique one. Our job as policymakers is to make sure we're giving the best possible advice to ministers. Working with the Government Outcomes Lab helps us to make sure we're engaging in debate which is well-researched, well-evidenced, and brings objectivity, robustness and rigorous data analysis.

The Government Outcomes Lab draw on a range of different sources in a way that perhaps hasn't been done before. They are bringing in practitioners from outside academia who actually work in the field to inform their thinking. And by cross-pollinating across different sectors, you get a rich discussion.”

James Magowan

Head of VCSE Public Sector Commissioning
Department for Digital, Culture,
Media and Sport (DCMS)
UK Government

Our approach

Bridging the gap between academia, policy and practice

A key part of what we do involves convening communities of people from a wide range of organisations and geographies, with a common interest in improving social outcomes through effective cross-sector partnerships.

Their diversity is reflected in our Visiting Fellows of Practice ([p.44](#)), who form the cornerstone of our efforts to reach out into different sectors. Over the years, GO Lab Fellows have spanned local government, the private sector and social investors, research organisations and NGOs, and international multilateral organisations like the World Bank and the European Commission.

We bring our broad community together at events like the Social Outcomes Conference ([p.37](#)), through our peer learning groups ([p.28](#)), and as part of specialist networks like INDIGO, our data collaborative ([p.32](#)).

Ultimately, we hope to help to share learning and foster a conversation about when and where different funding and accountability approaches might work, and how they can inform one another.

Academia

Researchers
Data analysts

Policy

Civil society organisations
Policy makers
Local authorities

Practice

Service providers
Commissioners
Outcome payers
Programme evaluators
Social investors



Our approach

Our audience

Our audience is incredibly diverse. To meet their needs, we’ve identified five key audience groups for our work, and tailor our approach to ensure we can provide relevant support and utilise their strengths.



Policy makers

We encourage policy makers to select and promote effective policies to foster effective cross-sector partnerships around a shared social outcome goal.



Decision makers

We equip decision makers to use evidence, to share learning and to work collaboratively towards better social outcomes.



Implementers

We help the implementers of cross-sector partnerships to design and manage effective approaches to improving social outcomes and overcome the complexities involved.



Opinion formers

We aim to foster discussion amongst opinion formers around which approaches can improve social outcomes for people and how these work.

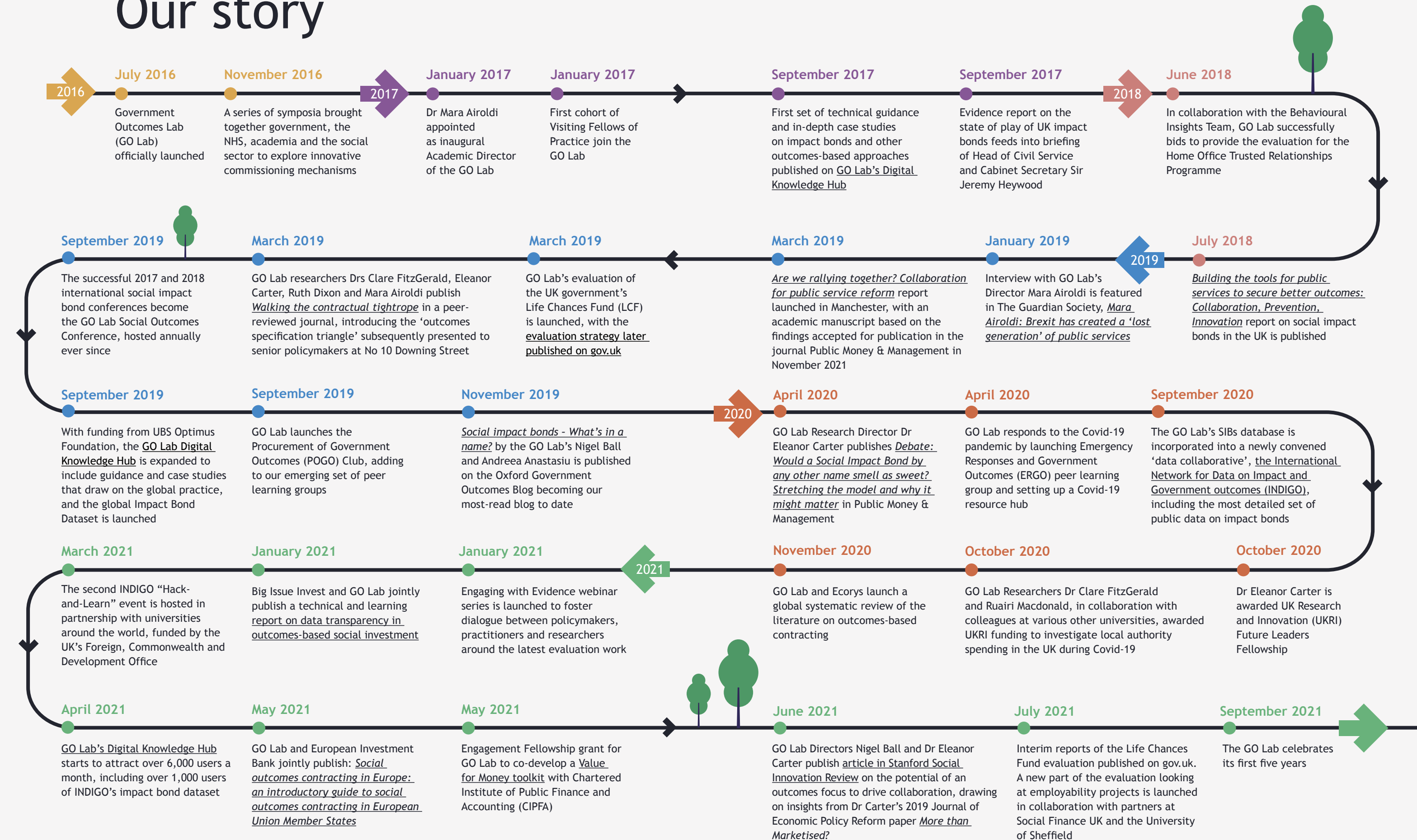


Researchers

We seek to constantly improve two-way learning between engaged researchers and practice.



Our story



Our strengths

The Government Outcomes Lab (GO Lab) represents a ground-breaking example of research-to-practice innovation.

We have developed five key strengths which we think demonstrate the power of an academic institution walking shoulder to shoulder with governments and the organisations that work alongside them.

01

Getting evidence into the hands of policymakers and practitioners

We work hard to ensure the evidence we generate, as well as the broader body of academic knowledge, gets into the hands of decision makers. Often, this means translating abstract ideas into accessible, digestible tools, as we did with the ‘outcomes specification triangle’ to help government commissioners navigate the trade-off between contract specification and transaction costs.

[See Case Study 1](#)

02

Providing objective, high-quality research that responds to practical issues

Often, academia can be isolated from the practical concerns of those ‘on the ground’. However, by listening carefully to the practitioners and policymakers we work with, we’re able to bring evidence that is responsive to the challenges they’re facing.

Our work on local collaborations, *Are We Rallying Together? Collaboration and Public Sector Reform*, is a great example of high-quality research that addresses real-world questions.

[See Case Study 2](#)

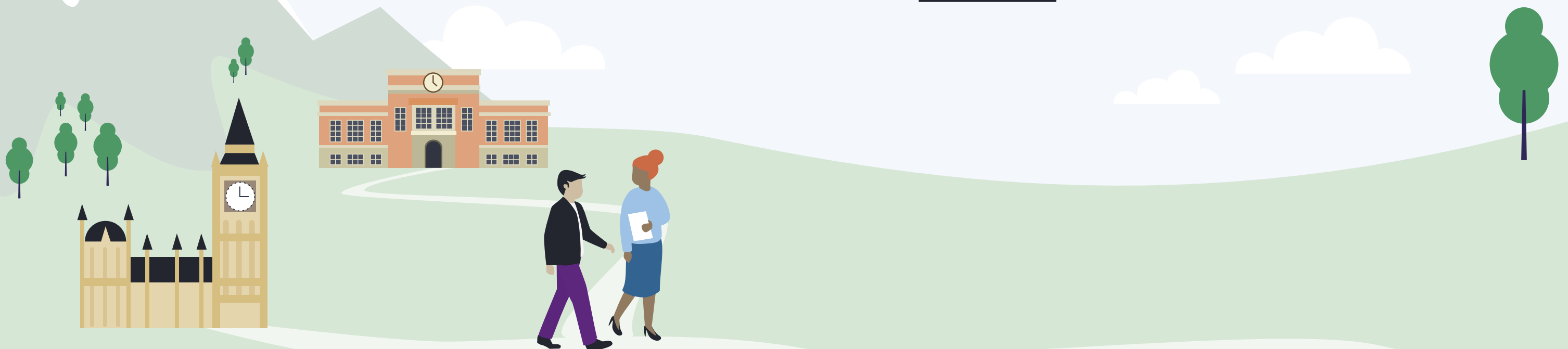
03

Building communities and convening partnerships

We know we’re not the only ones with valuable knowledge to share.

Practitioners, researchers and policymakers have insights that can directly inform one another’s work, so we provide forums for knowledge exchange through a range of peer learning groups and events, on outcomes-based contracting, procurement and measurement.

[See Case Study 3](#)



04

Improving data quality and accessibility

Good quality data is vital to understanding whether and how government might work with other sectors to improve social outcomes. Unfortunately, much of this data is fragmented and inaccessible.

Our emerging data collaborative, the [International Network for Data on Impact and Government Outcomes \(INDIGO\)](#), aims to bring together high-quality, open data on projects aiming to improve social outcomes around the world.

[See Case Study 4](#)

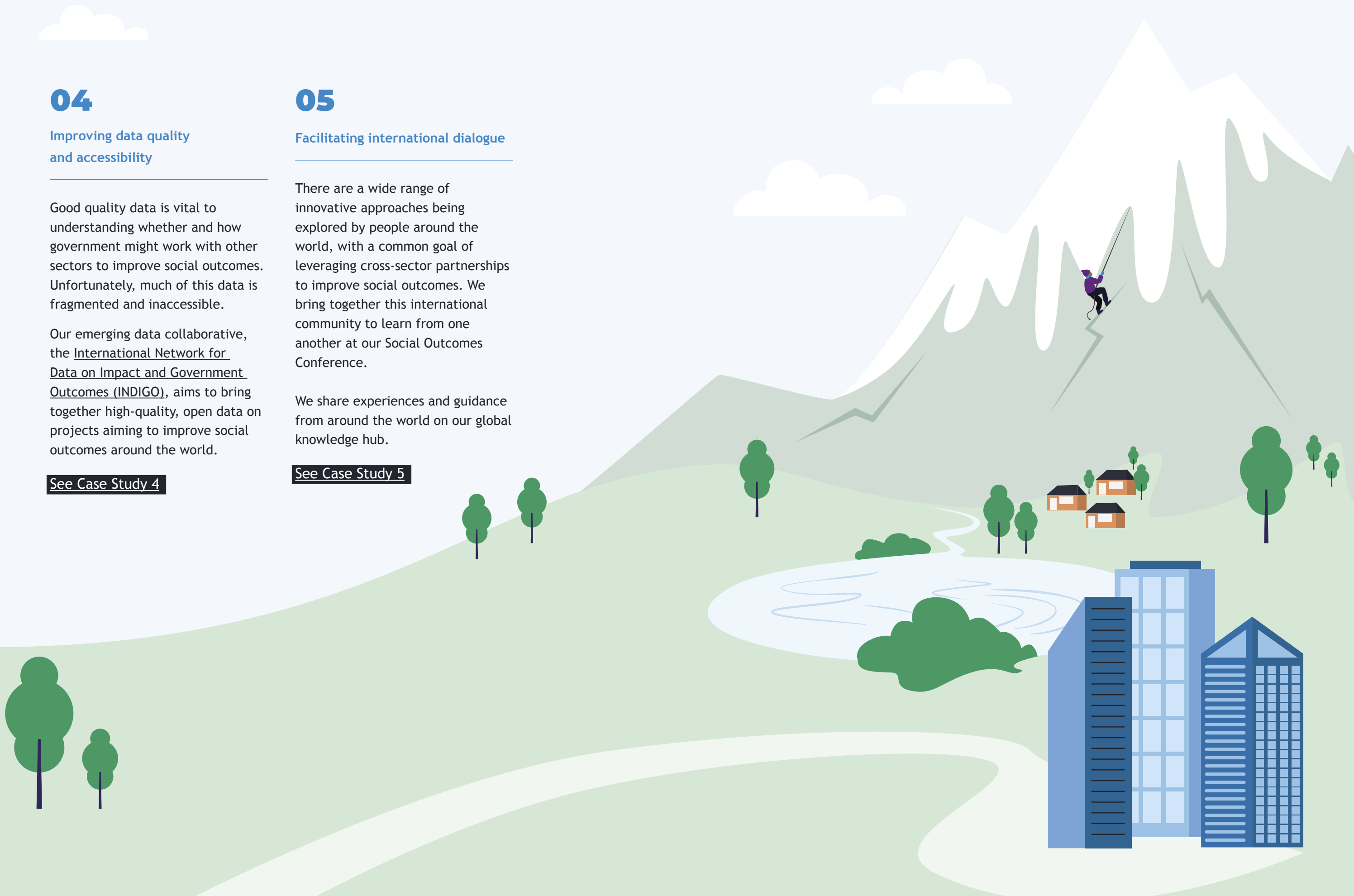
05

Facilitating international dialogue

There are a wide range of innovative approaches being explored by people around the world, with a common goal of leveraging cross-sector partnerships to improve social outcomes. We bring together this international community to learn from one another at our Social Outcomes Conference.

We share experiences and guidance from around the world on our global knowledge hub.

[See Case Study 5](#)





Case Study 1

Bringing evidence to the heart of UK government policymaking

In early 2016, the UK's Minister for Civil Society Rob Wilson stated "it is my ambition to have a SIBs market worth more than £1 billion by the end of this Parliament [2020]." At the same time, the UK government launched the £80m 'Life Chances Fund' to seed new projects. This marked a significant moment in the UK Government's effort to promote the use of social impact bonds (SIBs).

PbR and SIBs

'Payment by results' (PbR), sometimes known as 'results-based financing' or 'outcomes-based contracting', is a way of contracting for services whereby instead of paying social sector and private providers for specified services, as is typical, a government pays at least partly on the outcomes achieved by the people using services.

A 'social impact bond' (SIB) adds a third party: a social investor, who provides risk-bearing financial capital which may be lost if results are not achieved.



SIBs are a form of payment-by-results (PbR), yet in the UK, three major PbR programmes had met considerable controversy. The government wanted to ensure that the next crop of SIBs did not repeat these shortcomings. One of the most discussed limitations is the vulnerability of these types of contracts to 'opportunistic' practices, where the parties to a contract seek ways to take advantage of each other for their own gain. All contracts are vulnerable to such practices, but they can be more damaging in services related to social outcomes, due to the risk that service providers squeeze more money from the contract by neglecting harder-to-help participants.

In 2015, Eleanor Carter (now our Research Director) and a co-author had identified six distinct ways that contracting bodies have attempted to mitigate these opportunistic practices, but noted that it is a largely trial-and-error process. To make it more systematic, the GO Lab's research team worked with policymakers in the UK government to develop an 'outcomes specification triangle' (p.27) based on the

Transaction Cost Economics framework, which emerged from the work of Nobel prize-winning economists Ronald Coase and Oliver Williamson. The tool aims to help government commissioners consider a trade-off between what can be specified up-front in the contract, and where to leave space for discretion and trust. They must walk a tightrope: minimise provider and investor opportunism, yet balance the costs associated with developing a robust outcomes specification.

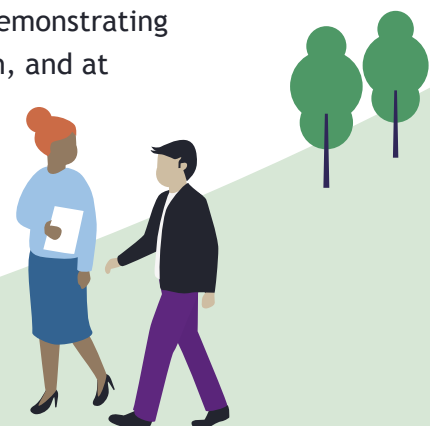
The outcomes specification triangle is a good illustration of the value of bringing together robust academic research with the needs of policymakers and practitioners. It is based on firm academic foundations, yet maintains an elegant simplicity that makes it quick to understand and easy to use. The tool was published in a peer-reviewed academic journal, demonstrating its intellectual validity and enabling it to spark further research, and at the same time it responds to a clear practitioner need: how do we avoid well-known pitfalls and thus continue to improve experimental methods of commissioning and contracting?

On GO Lab's visit to No.10

“A deeply thoughtful session which exemplified precisely how to make a substantive contribution at the tricky interface between academic research and policy development”

Tom Le Quesne

Former Head of the UK Government's Inclusive Economy Unit. Now Special Advisor for Responsible Business at Lloyds.



Alongside other, similar tools developed by members of the GO Lab’s research team, this work has achieved considerable traction across the UK Government. We have discussed our research at No. 10 Downing Street, in several government departments, and Her Majesty’s Treasury.

Though headlines around PbR experiments had led to a cooling of attitudes across Whitehall, our work has been credited with providing a new narrative that sees PbR through the prism of enhanced partnerships: a way to promote collaboration and enhanced performance management, rather than just a short-term fiscal shortcut or method of enforcing top-down accountability.



Practical tools based on original research

The ‘outcomes specification triangle’ is just one of many tools we’ve developed to help get academic insights into the hands of practitioners. For example, Dr Mehdi Shiva (assisted by Ruby Dickson and Chevano Baker)

has been leading the development of a suite of economic tools to aid practitioner decision making:

An Impact Wayfinder

This helps practitioners navigate hundreds of options to find the most relevant social impact measurement resources

A Value for Money toolkit

In collaboration with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), this helps public managers assess Value for Money for outcomes-based projects

A decision tree sourcing tool

This helps public managers consider alternative ways to contract out a public service aimed at improving social outcomes

Outcomes specification triangle: Designing a robust framework

1. Cohort | Tightly defined eligible cohort

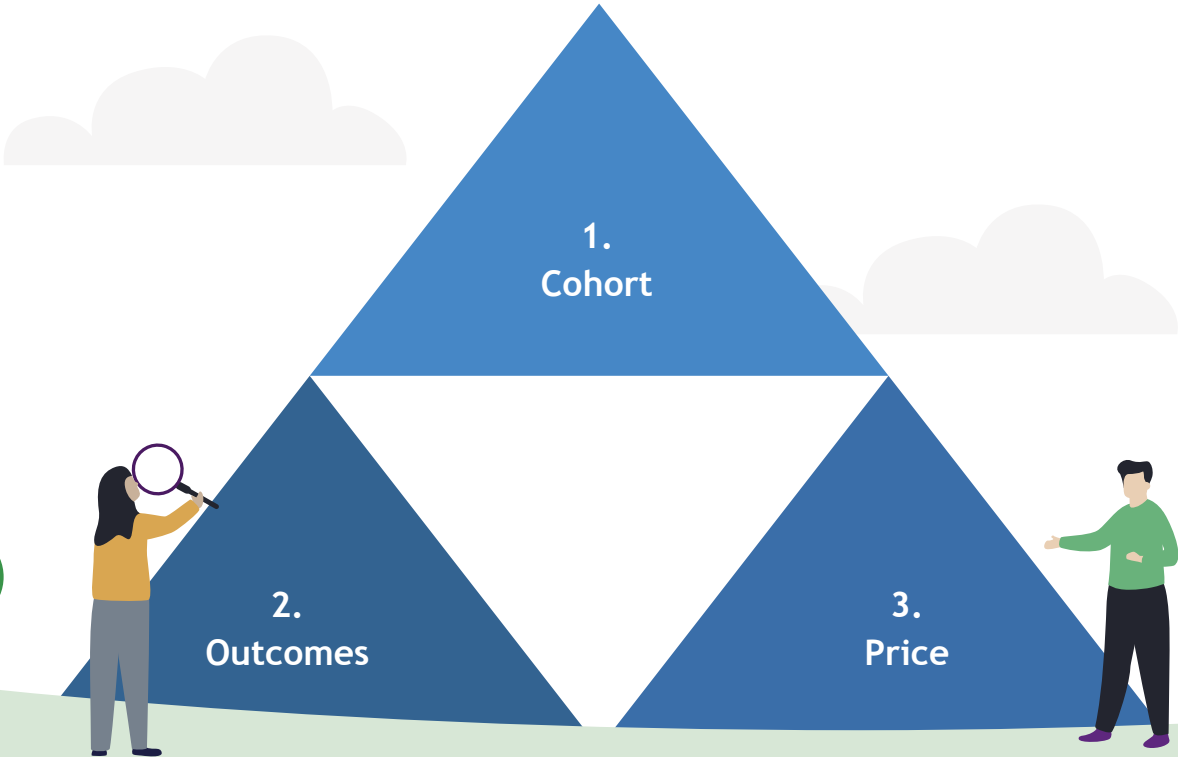
- Clear objective data
- Understanding of how far participants are from desired outcomes
- Independent referral/identification mechanism

2. Outcomes | Alignment between payable outcomes and policy objectives

- Logical link between activity, outputs and outcomes
- Adequate period of time for tracking
- A way to tell if the effect has ‘stuck’

3. Price | Accurate price-setting of outcomes

- Robust estimate of likely level of benefit vs what would happen anyway (dead weight)
- A way to get confidence that any outcomes are caused by the intervention (attribution)
- Suitably long outcome tracking-period



Case Study 2

Responsiveness to the demand for evidence to inform local practice

Over the course of 2018, the GO Lab facilitated a series of regional conferences around the UK, bringing together local government commissioners to learn from each other about social impact bonds and outcomes-based commissioning.

At a session in the West Midlands, over a drink in the wings of the event, the broader subject of how greater collaboration might improve efficiency came up: how can government coordinate multiple organisations to work together and share resources to support a policy goal? While local authorities valued the contributions and cost savings that collaboration could bring, realising these benefits was not straightforward, and the move away from more traditional contractual relationships meant relinquishing power to partner organisations.

To address these concerns, we brought academic analysis to bear on the issue, combining academic theory and primary research to develop practical guidance on effective collaboration. This culminated in the 2019 report *Are We Rallying Together? Collaboration and Public Service Reform*. The report is a great example of our ability to provide objective, high-quality research that responds to practical questions and challenges.

The question of how to make cross-sector collaborative partnerships work well was difficult to frame in an academic context. A team came together to make sense of the practice, link to academic frameworks, and provide useful guidance to practitioners.

The team undertook empirical research across the UK, from Scotland to Somerset, examining a number of different types of multi-organisation local partnerships. The collaborations covered a range of policy areas, including



Businesses as a powerful partner

Building off the earlier work of our associate Jo Blundell, our Researcher and Policy Associate, Ian Taylor, is looking at how government collaborates with the social sector and businesses in local places. Businesses can be a powerful partner in improving social outcomes, and at the GO Lab, we're keen to understand the important role they might play. We're engaging with a range of academics and practitioners, including through membership of Business In The Community's Place Taskforce, and supporting work by Professors Sir Paul Collier and Philip McCann on the UK Government's levelling up agenda.



health, children's services, economic growth, and public sector reform, and were convened by different stakeholders, from councils to mission-led businesses. Despite their differences, each was bringing together organisations beyond formalised contractual relationships to deliver key services. Our enquiries focused on four key themes: culture and behaviour, measurement and accountability, defining roles and governance structure.

The findings of the 'Rallying Together' research had both practical and academic value. They were communicated at several events and furthered the discourse on place-based services and public sector reform. Practitioners now had the intellectual scaffolding to understand the mechanics of the practice they were undertaking or aspiring to, enabling communication and improvement. We also broadened our expertise in place-based approaches, and have moved onto further practical engagement in this area, such as our involvement with Essex County Council's Partnership Board and our exploration of the role of responsible business in supporting local areas.

The quality of the work has also been recognised within the academic community. The report informed an article in a peer-reviewed journal, focusing on co-creation of social innovation in public services, which is due to be published in November 2021. The report itself has been cited in academic works and used as part of the teaching material for a course at King's College London. And the expertise we developed helped secure funded research commissioned by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), as well as collaborations with other academics.

Attracting prestigious research funding

In October 2020, GO Lab's Research Director Dr Eleanor Carter was awarded a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship - only the third University of Oxford Fellow ever to receive such an award. Worth up to £1.2 million, the Fellowship will investigate whether the current focus on commissioning individual public services is fit-for-purpose, and how the use of delivery networks might better serve the people who use them. She will be joined on the project by Dr Felix-Anselm Van Lier.



Eleanor says: *"I am thrilled: my fellowship will bring diligent and original research to help avert further public contracting fiascos and boost the quality of services experienced by some of the most disadvantaged members of society."*



“ The Government Outcomes Lab has given me the opportunity to share experiences with people from all over the world from a wide range of organisations and perspectives.

I find it fascinating to hear the way that topics such as public procurement, social value and outcomes-based contracting are viewed by people with different drivers from myself. This helps me to continually challenge and develop my own views.”

Mark Roddan

Joint Head of Strategic Procurement,
North Somerset Council and
South Gloucestershire Council
GO Lab Visiting Fellow of Practice 2020 and 2021

Case Study 3

Building communities of peers around shared interests: nurturing the capacity of practitioners

During the early years of the GO Lab, as we provided support to social impact bond (SIB) projects, the challenges of procurement were raised again and again. As a new method for contracting with the social sector, SIBs typically required flexibility in the procurement procedure.

Yet public procurement is often understood and practised as a rigid, technical process rather than as a driver of innovation. This perception is inaccurate and leads to missed opportunities: OECD countries spend a total of 12% of their collective GDP on public procurement. The UK government spends even more: 15% of its GDP.

To explore how this issue could be addressed, the GO Lab brought together a group of people from academia, policy and practice who are passionate about improving the way government buys public services.



The Oxford Procurement of Government Outcomes (POGO) club

was founded in 2019, at a roundtable session at that year's Social Outcomes Conference. Although the initial focus of the group was on impact bonds, it quickly expanded to a broader conversation about the role of procurement in improving social outcomes. A monthly online meeting was established to discuss the latest issues from both research and practice, and the chair was taken up by Anne Davies, Professor of Law and Public Policy.

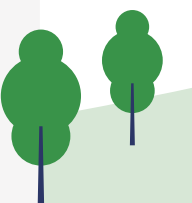


Since January 2020, we have hosted over 35 peer learning group meetings

Procurement in the time of Covid-19

GO Lab Research Fellow Dr Clare FitzGerald and Research Associate Ruairi Macdonald, alongside other leading academics, have recently embarked on a large study into how the annual £100bn UK local government procurement spend is being dispensed during the pandemic. This has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) rapid response to Covid-19.

Clare says: "Deepening our understanding of how the people responsible for spending public money responded individually and collectively to Covid-19 is integral to improving how we prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate future crises."



With a membership of lawyers, procurement professionals, academics and policymakers, many of whom brought a public sector commissioning perspective that is often missing from academia, the group has offered a space for its members to dive into the important issues of the day.

One year on from the first roundtable, the members decided to establish a set of working groups, focused on producing tangible outputs. These have already led to [a response to the UK Government's Green Paper on "transforming public procurement"](#) following the country's exit from the EU. Other groups continue to work on drafting impact bond contract templates and bringing together a data set on social value procurement.

POGO demonstrates our ability to bring together academics and practitioners for discussion that is meaningful and productive for all. The group led to the GO Lab securing funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), as part of a multi-university collaboration, to investigate the impact of Covid-19 on public procurement.



Alongside POGO, we have peer learning groups that cover outcomes-based approaches in particular regions of the UK, the sharing and use of social outcomes data, and how measuring social outcomes can best support effective accountability. Our peer learning approach, which brings together diverse stakeholders

from a variety of sectors to learn from one another, is coordinated by Leigh Crowley.

Emergency Responses and Government Outcomes

In March 2020, the UK went into a national lockdown to attempt to control the spread of Covid-19, with a significant impact on social services - including those run under outcomes-based contracts. To offer what support we could, we established the Emergency Responses and Government Outcomes (ERGO) group, along with a Covid-19 resource hub. This brought together a group of people involved in outcomes contracts to help them learn from each other's responses, as well as from broader insights into both outcomes-based contracting and disaster response.



“ The Government Outcomes Lab’s convening power is fantastic. As an academic, one of the attractions about working with the team is that they’re very well-connected and truly focussed on making an impact.

The POGO Club network has enabled us to keep up to date with current developments in procurement and outcomes-based contracting and to stay at the cutting edge of what’s really going on. We’ve been able to get speakers from all over the world to discuss different ways of evaluating and developing policy which provides a great opportunity to understand what’s happening in this space at both regional and international levels.

And getting those practitioner perspectives really helps to inform our academic work and the sorts of research questions that we want to answer. It’s exciting to be able to think about ways that research might contribute to making things better in the real world.”

Anne Davies

POGO Chair, Professor of Law and Public Policy
Former Dean of the Oxford Faculty of Law

Case Study 4

Collaborating with others to create common global public datasets

In 2017, Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary to Prime Minister Theresa May, requested a special report on the state of play of impact bonds across the UK, to identify whether they work, and whether public funds should be invested in developing them. In partnership with colleagues at the UK Government's Centre for Social Impact Bonds, we worked to produce more robust evidence that might help to answer those questions.



At the time, the required data was spread between various parts of government and suppliers. We negotiated access to those fragmented pieces of data and used them to build a comprehensive and reliable impact bond dataset. Thanks to countless organisations that contributed data, reports and evaluations, we were able to compile the first ever substantive dataset on impact bonds in the UK, which informed the report delivered to senior government officials.

On the value of INDIGO

“It is really useful to be able to dip into this dataset and draw out the information in a way that is digestible for policymakers who have to make decisions quickly”

Radana Crhova

Impact Investing Team Leader at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)

Two years later, we were approached by what was then the Department for International Development (DfID) in the UK Government to expand the scope of the dataset to cover impact bonds around the world. With the support of the UBS Optimus Foundation, we undertook a second data crunch, and by September 2019 we were able to launch the [Global Impact Bond Dataset](#), the most comprehensive publicly accessible database of impact bonds around the world.

Over time, we've continued to update the Impact Bond Dataset, adding new projects, and additional details for existing ones, as well as providing new ways to explore the data with tools and visualisations.

As we have developed our data initiatives, this need for collaboration has been a consistent theme. Rarely does one stakeholder hold all the information that must come together to build a useful dataset. Instead, it is distributed between many parties, with coordination and consolidation required to bring the data together in a meaningful way.

At the other end of the data machine, there is a diverse range of people interested in using the dataset for an equally diverse range of reasons. Collaboration between data users - be they researchers, policymakers, or practitioners - helps us to ensure the data we collate is accessible and helpful to all. That's why, in 2020, we started to host the [International Network for Data on Impact and Government Outcomes \(INDIGO\)](#).

INDIGO is about more than a single team building a single dataset on a single contracting tool (impact bonds). It includes a dataset to link impact bonds and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, a Social Investment/Fund Manager extension (developed in collaboration with Big Issue Invest), and a directory of outcomes funds around the world, all freely available online. It also includes an Impact Wayfinder to navigate different measurement tools.

And as the collaborative grows, our aim is to mobilise other communities to build more datasets, such as on social value procurement.

We refer to INDIGO as a ‘data collaborative’, representing a global community of researchers, data enthusiasts, practitioners and policymakers, united by a shared interest in leveraging the power of data to help governments improve social outcomes for the people they serve. The community regularly comes together online for peer learning meetings and ‘Hack and Learn’ events.

A big step for data transparency

In 2020, the GO Lab and Big Issue Invest (BII) joined forces to make the data from BII’s Outcomes Investment Fund shareable and to develop a standardised approach to the way impact bonds, and the role of the investor, are reported in the wider market.

This led to the release of [the first technical and learning report on data transparency in the social outcomes sector](#), which provides data, tools and a proposed set of definitions to open a discussion with the market on the ways in which we can facilitate data sharing to improve delivery of outcomes.

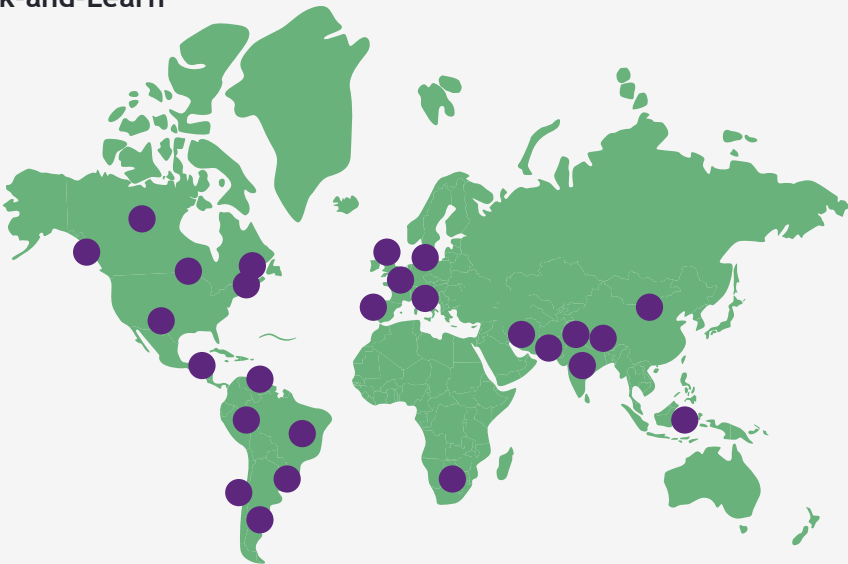
On the value of INDIGO

“INDIGO has brought together best practices, lessons and key actors across the market to share insights and drive excellence.”

Joshua Meek
Head of Impact at Big Issue Invest

1000+ The number users per month that the INDIGO Impact Bond Dataset, hosted on the GO Lab’s website, now attracts. And this is increasing every day.

Hack-and-Learn



Our bi-annual Hack-and-Learn is a two-week online event designed to give data lovers and policy enthusiasts around the world a chance to connect and work together to tackle pressing challenges in existing social outcomes projects. Harnessing skills and experiences from a diverse pool of actors, it provides a space for learning and community building around the use of data.



For the second Hack-and-Learn event in March 2021, the GO Lab gained funding from the UK Government’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and partnered up with Georgetown University’s Beeck Center for Social Impact + Innovation, INSPER, University of Cape Town’s Bertha Centre and Ashoka University’s Centre for Social Impact & Philanthropy. Supported by Open Data Services, the event attracted over 150 attendees from around the world. Each instalment of the Hack-and-Learn features a range of exciting practical data challenges, coordinated by GO Lab’s Data Steward Juliana Outes Velarde, with the help of Research Assistant Mayra Gramani.



Case Study 5

Global hub of knowledge and international dialogue for outcomes-based approaches

Academic study is sometimes seen as theoretical and detached from real-world, practical problems. Academic conferences can certainly seem distanced from practice when they cater to a fairly narrow crowd of researchers. However, if academic insights are to make a difference, it is vital they reach those on the front lines of policy and practice around the world.

In 2017, with a number of partners, the GO Lab helped organise the second international social impact bond (SIB) conference at Newcastle University Business School. Unlike a traditional academic conference, it brought together both researchers and practitioners to reflect on what a social impact bond actually is, and how SIBs stack up against the expectations people have for the approach.

The following year, we hosted the international conference at the Blavatnik School of Government, comparing SIBs and other outcomes-based approaches across different countries and policy sectors. A special issue of the Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis emerged from the conference, which we guest edited alongside academics from King's College London and Newcastle University. And in 2019, this evolved into the first instalment of our Social Outcomes Conference, covering an even broader range of topics related to cross-sector partnerships. Each conference since has attracted a diverse range of people from across different sectors and geographies, with stakeholders from research and practice backgrounds presenting alongside (and, on occasion, animatedly debating with) one another.



In 2020, Covid-19 restrictions meant we were unable to welcome people to Oxford in-person and had to take the conference online. Over four days, we delivered our biggest and most international conference to date, with hundreds of leading academics, policymakers and practitioners from around the world in (virtual) attendance.



On the Social Outcomes Conference

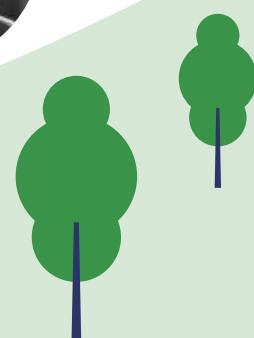
“This is exactly the kind of event we celebrate in the School: putting together outstanding, applied scholars with thoughtful, energetic practitioners based on the research and evidence we have generated.”

Calum Miller

COO and Associate Dean,
Blavatnik School of Government

The conference brings together the rigour of the most recent, cutting-edge academic research with an applied, real-world focus. It is the jewel in the crown of our efforts to engage with academic and practice audiences from around the world. But it is not the only way in which we feed into debates around improving social outcomes internationally.

Our Global Knowledge Hub, managed by Laura Bonsaver, includes guidance and case studies that draw on global practice with outcomes-based approaches, as well as a curated publications library. We host the Oxford Government Outcomes Blog, edited by Michael Gibson, sharing the latest views on a wide range of topics related to cross-sector partnership working. And, to further advance the state of knowledge on outcomes-based contracting, we are now working on a global systematic review of all the evidence relating to the use of these contracting approaches worldwide.





Global systematic review of social outcomes contracting

In partnership with research consultancy Ecorys and co-funded by the Netherlands Economic Institute, the GO Lab is currently undertaking a systematic review of the evidence on outcomes-based contracting from around the world. The review draws on both academic and practical literature from a range of disciplines and languages, and has already covered over 10,000 abstracts. A high-level international Policy Advisory Group has been convened to ensure the insights produced are relevant to policymakers. Dr Harry Bregazzi has recently joined the project as a postdoctoral researcher to help take the research forward.

100+

webinars, conferences and workshops organised by the GO Lab

6,000

Global Knowledge Hub monthly users joining from over 140 countries worldwide

18

case studies

4

open data sets

10

introductory and technical guides

100+

blog articles

Our Engaging with Evidence webinar series offers an open platform for the global community of researchers, practitioners and policymakers to engage with key findings from the latest research and evaluation work. We help to build capacity in organisations working to improve outcomes the UK and further afield. For example, working alongside the Blavatnik School's Case Centre we developed a pedagogical case study based on the Multi-Systemic Therapy social impact bond in Essex, which has been taught using the 'case method' to groups of senior civil servants. And we recently facilitated workshops with the West Midlands Combined Authority in the UK, with the Education Outcomes Fund, and with stakeholders in Pakistan, in partnership with the British Asian Trust.

Engaging with Evidence



The Engaging with Evidence series, co-led by Research and Policy Associate Tanyah Hameed, began in January 2021 and continues to present our audiences with independent, high quality research and the latest practical insights from the ground. Over six sessions to date, the webinar series has engaged 783 attendees, many of whom are leading figures in international organisations, including the European Commission, the World Bank, and the OECD. Sessions have drawn on the latest evidence and insights on outcomes funds around the world, social impact bonds in Latin America, development impact bonds across Africa and Asia, the resilience of outcomes-based partnerships during the Covid-19 pandemic and the world's first impact bond for maternal health in India.



On the Engaging with Evidence series

“A fantastic curation and a really well run exchange. The Government Outcomes Lab team are doing a terrific job. I am both inspired and challenged by what is being shared – which probably means that I am learning a lot”

Marta Garcia

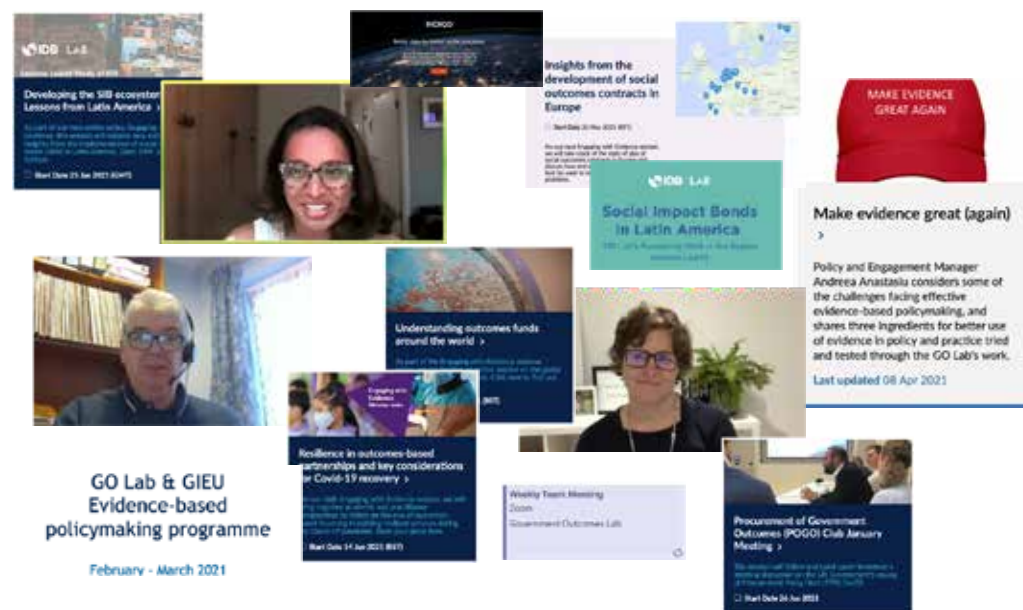
Director at Social Finance UK

Visiting Fellows of Practice

Each year we appoint a small group of leading practitioners from across the public, private and social sectors to support our mission. The Fellows bring a wealth of practical insights and in-depth experience in a range of different fields, and ensure our work remains responsive and relevant to those implementing outcomes-focused partnerships for better social outcomes.

Visiting Fellows contribute to our work in many different ways, from providing input into our research and analytical work, speaking at our events, authoring and reviewing papers, and sharing learning to strengthen the global community of practitioners.

In 2021 we were joined by eleven Visiting Fellows of Practice with expertise spanning sectors and countries, from funding complex projects in South Asia and Latin America, to leading new cross-sector partnerships from the ground up.



“ I think the uniqueness of the Government Outcomes Lab is second to none. It brings together members of the public, private and voluntary sectors who don’t normally talk to each other. It allows them to be challenged by each other conceptually, critically and practically. There are very few places that do this so well.

In my Fellow’s cohort, we have practitioners from around the world, all with different voices and perspectives, which creates a rich tapestry of information and provides a space for us to stop and reflect on our work. It has certainly been the biggest value the Government Outcomes Lab has given me and my practice.

In our increasingly politically polarised world, people who are working on development need to be working together. That’s why it is so important that the Government Outcomes Lab is so outward facing.”

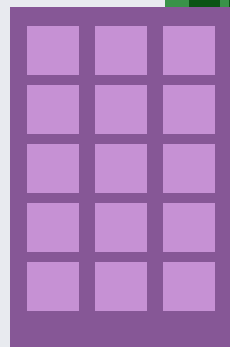
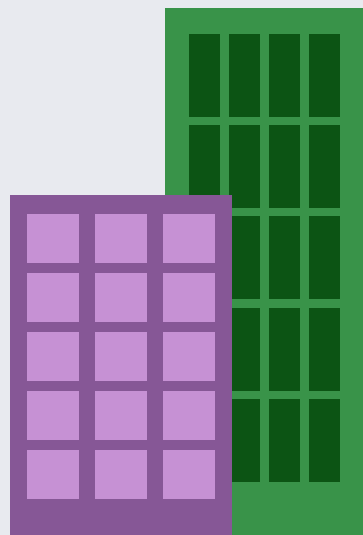
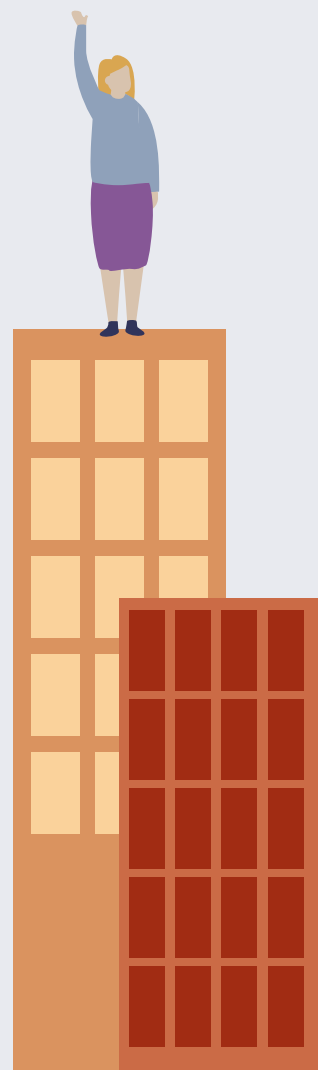
Abha Thorat-Shah

Executive Director of Social Finance, British Asian Trust
GO Lab Visiting Fellow of Practice 2020 and 2021

The Life Chances Fund

The Life Chances Fund (LCF) was launched as an £80 million fund from the UK Government's Civil Society directorate, designed to help people in society who face the most significant barriers to leading happy and productive lives.

The fund is dedicated to supporting the growth and development of outcomes-based commissioning through the use of social impact bonds (SIBs), by providing a top-up payment to local government commissioners. The GO Lab is conducting evaluation across the portfolio of 31 projects offered funding by the LCF. Undertaking research work in partnership with projects offers a great opportunity for improving our collective understanding of the SIB model as a commissioning tool.



THE PRIMARY EVALUATION

Every project that receives LCF funds is involved in our primary evaluation. It is a project-level evaluation, utilising information collected as part of the fund administration process, complemented by a survey conducted during set up, delivery, and at the end of the project.

Following the onset of Covid-19 restrictions in March 2020, the primary evaluation sought also to capture the impact of the pandemic on LCF projects, and the adaptations they have made in response. This led to an academic paper on organisational resilience during Covid-19, which was presented by GO Lab Research Fellow Dr Ruth Dixon at the International Research Society for Public Management annual conference.



THE SUPPLEMENTARY EVALUATION

The supplementary evaluation takes a more in-depth look at particular project sites that provide an opportunity to compare services delivered under the SIB to similar projects commissioned in other ways.

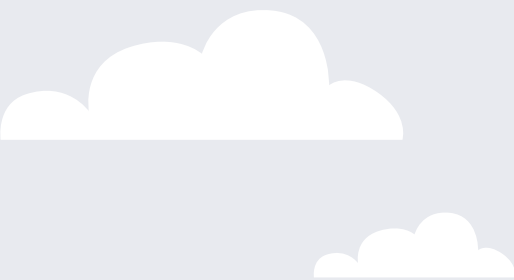
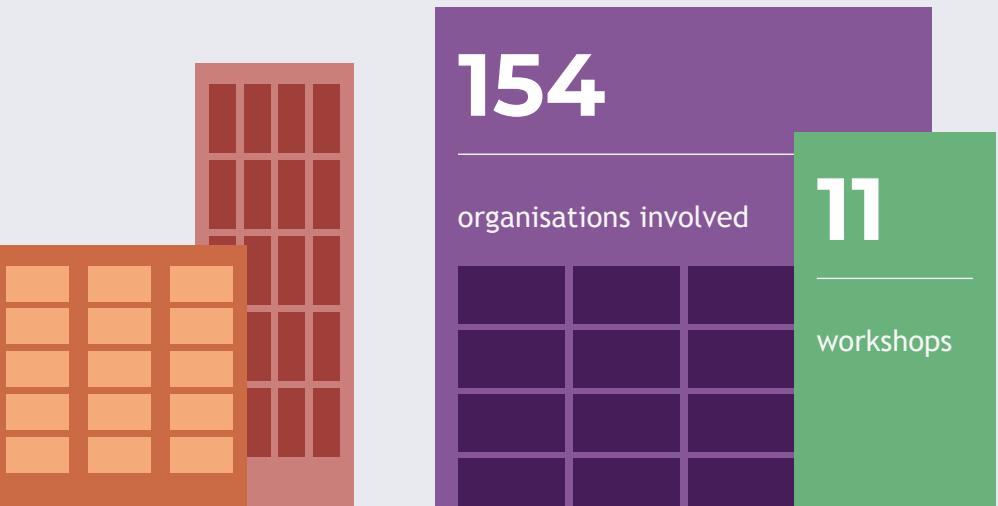
Kirklees Better Outcomes Partnership

The Kirklees Better Outcomes Partnership SIB seeks to improve a range of outcomes for vulnerable adults in need of support to live independently. The project offers an exciting evaluation opportunity as it was preceded by similar provision of ‘floating support’ under fee-for-service contracting arrangements. The first report from the Kirklees supplementary evaluation, focusing on the legacy fee-for-service contracting arrangements and the potential of the SIB model, was published in July 2021.



“What really excites me about our research in Kirklees is the opportunity to grow our understanding on how to create a more collaborative and effective local service ecosystem with ultimately better social outcomes for people accessing the service.”

Franziska Rosenbach
Research Associate, GO Lab



Children’s Social Care

The team undertook cross-sectional research to explore the business case lying behind seven Life Chances Fund projects related to the state care of vulnerable children. The research investigates the justifications and alternative SIB design approaches adopted by local authority commissioners to support children and families ‘at the edge’ of (or already within) the statutory care system. The LCF Children’s Social Care report was published in July 2021 and the findings will feed into the UK government’s recently launched Care Review.

Mental Health and Employment Partnership

The Mental Health and Employment Partnership (MHEP) SIBs commissioned through the LCF form the most recent supplementary evaluation site. The evaluation, in collaboration with Social Finance UK and the University of Sheffield, was launched in June 2021.



What we've learnt

At the Government Outcomes Lab, we combine a scholarly desire to move forward the frontier of knowledge with a motivation to answer real questions that governments and their partners are asking.

We know what it takes to meet the bar for a quality academic paper, and at the same time how to make evidence useable for busy practitioners. Our approach has been successful over the last five years in part due to our willingness to acknowledge and address the tensions that inevitably arise in this mode of working.



1. Contrasting time horizons

Perhaps the most obvious tension we've faced is the different speed at which outputs are expected in academia versus the world of policy and practice. Much quality research takes years - particularly if it is aiming to assess the impact of a policy over time. But policymakers and decision-makers often need answers in weeks or even days.

We have had to work hard to ensure we can provide useful insights quickly - so that our work has the impact we want - while maintaining a focus on attaining the deep knowledge that can only emerge via the rigour and discipline of academic research. This type of research will not provide the quickest answers, but it often provides the most powerful ones. Providing insights that transcend political or administrative planning cycles is one of the key benefits that we, as an academic institution, can bring.

2. The tone and positioning of insights

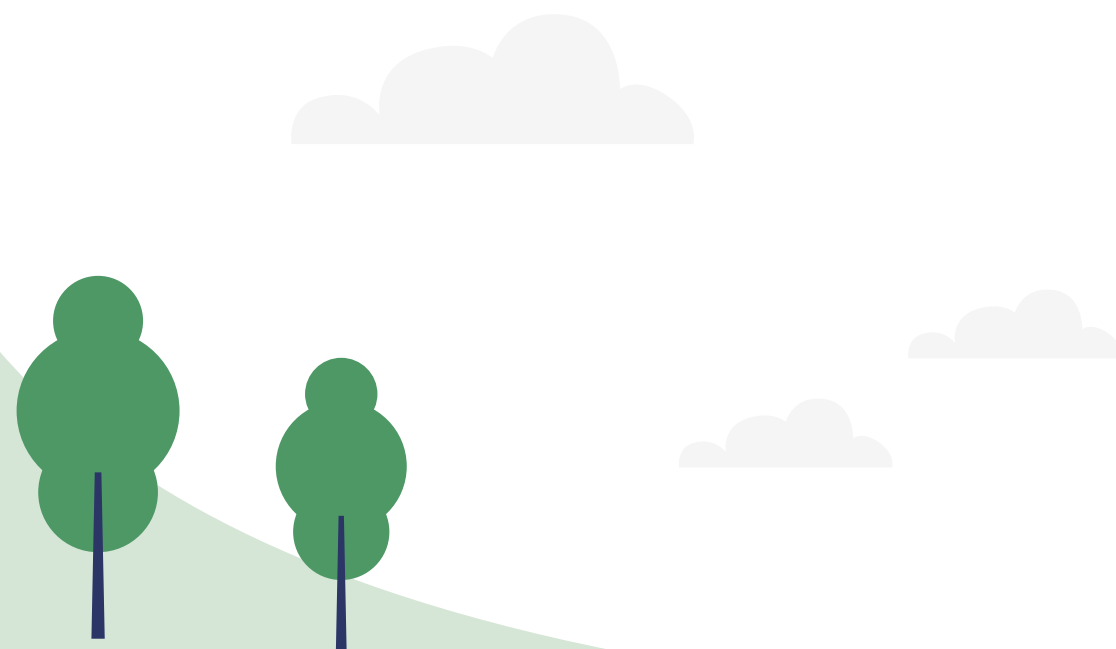
Policies and projects may have aspects that worked well, and setbacks to learn from. It is fundamental to our integrity as an academic institution that we expound both: our commitment to doing so is what creates the trust that gives evidence its power. But the evidence rarely points in one direction. We know we must help our audiences to exercise their own judgment. The language used to communicate nuance matters: an overly complicated explanation can obscure a simple message; a poorly worded phrase can alienate before it has the chance to inform. We also understand that while most policymakers and practitioners have a genuine desire to follow the evidence, other imperatives are always at play.



3. Differences in culture and professional norms

Our community is diverse and professional expectations vary. Academia values intellectual rigour, and time and space to think is essential. Governments must be more pragmatic, but while central governments are influenced by political priorities and the media, local delivery agencies are confronted with the day-to-day challenges of service delivery.

These different priorities can create unhelpful perceptions that can hold back the successful integration of evidence into practice. Researchers may not have a sensitive understanding of political or practical realities; policymakers may lack the time to unpick all the subtleties in what the evidence is telling them. But through discussion, members of each community come to realise the valuable insight they can gain from those with a different perspective.



4. Different incentives and rewards for team members

Perhaps the starkest tension between government and academia is related to how people progress professionally. The worlds of policy and practice typically reward those with a broad base of transferable skills (the UK civil service is well known to actively encourage its people to move between departments frequently). The academic world, conversely, rewards deep, expert knowledge of a niche area covered by few others. The danger this creates is that practitioners fail to perceive the relevance of a piece of research to their policy area, and academics miss out on close engagement with their research findings. As a team, we put effort into getting evidence to leap from the tidy pages of journals to the messy discourse of policy and practice. We nurture the skill of uncovering the broader insights that a tightly focused piece of research unlocks.

Ultimately, navigating these tensions relies on the strong relationships we build with the wide array of people and organisations working towards better social outcomes.

This creates an understanding and a respect for our differing roles.





Looking forward

The Government Outcomes Lab exists to support government to work more effectively with private and social sector partners. Building on the strong track record we have established during our first five years, we will continue to deliver according to our unique formula of academic insight blended with a practical outlook.

We will particularly focus on the following four areas in the coming years.

01

We will continue to synthesise existing evidence, and generate new evidence, on outcome-based contracting

Using outcomes as a means of guiding decision making and accountability is likely to remain a widespread, and hotly debated practice. But it takes many forms. It can mean tying outcomes to payment, using evaluation more meaningfully during delivery and in strategic planning, or finding new ways to incorporate data collection and analysis into the management of services. There will never be a single approach that works in all places and times - but there will always be ways to improve on current practice, whether it employs these mechanisms or not.

Our extensive, multi-method and interdisciplinary study of the UK government's Life Chances Fund and the projects within it, will continue with a longitudinal study lasting until the fund's conclusion. Our global systematic review into outcomes-based contracting will unlock insights that are useful across the full range of contracting approaches. We will keep developing robust, uncomplicated, pragmatic tools to help practitioners use evidence in decisions daily.

02

We will delve further into matters of how government contracting relates to social outcomes

The way that governments work with other sectors has been brought into sharp relief by Covid-19. The complementary strengths of the public sector, private sector and social sector are apparent in all aspects of the pandemic response globally. But this has also increased the urgency of improving the way the sectors intersect. Public procurement, which makes up 12% of the GDP of OECD countries, is particularly important not just because of its vast scale, but because it draws governments directly into partnership with organisations from other sectors. These partnerships could often be much more productive.

We will increase our efforts to grow networks and research to explore how public contracting practice affects social outcomes, both positively and negatively. This is partly about improving the way outsourced public services are procured. Our multi-year study into how local and central government commissions services for vulnerable people in the UK will unpack new ways of managing delivery networks in places. But it is also a question of how the purchase of any goods and services by governments can be done in a way that maximises 'social value' - whether these goods and services are obviously 'social' or not.

03

We will maintain our efforts to gather, organise and share useful data on how cross-sector partnerships work

Data is becoming an ever-more critical aspect of our lives, and its value is undeniable. Much data exists on cross-sector partnerships related to social outcomes, but it is seldom structured using standard definitions, consolidated in a single place, or made available to those who could make use of it. The engagement and active participation of data users is essential to addressing these limitations, which is the aim of our INDIGO data collaborative.

We will continue to nurture INDIGO in two ways. We will work with others to add new datasets, to provide pioneering examples of the power of data standards and open data. And we will collaborate globally, drawing together partners who can build the data collaborative in their region. And we commit to continue with our open approach - to publish everything we learn from INDIGO and our wider research online, in practitioner-friendly language, on our global knowledge hub.

04

We will build on our collaboration with scholars and practitioners from all over the world

Cross-sector partnerships do not happen in isolation and can often defy easy categorisation. The breadth and diversity of the GO Lab's network of thinkers and doers from all over the world is a testament to our recognition of this reality. World-leading scholars speak at our conference, sit on our advisory board, and collaborate on research projects with us. We continuously bring together people who are grappling first-hand with ways to manage social programmes to learn from evidence, and each other.

We will continue to bring together complementary academic disciplines, like economics, public management, law and social policy, and contrasting practitioner perspectives, from civil servants to CEOs to frontline workers. And we will continue to draw on related research and debate, like on how to 'level up' Britain or harness responsible business.



Our commitment

In all the work we do going forward, just as with all the work we have done to date, working towards improved social outcomes will be our guiding principle. We commit our continuing support to our strong and ever-growing network of scholars and practitioners who share our dedication to this goal.

Our partners and funders



Since its inception, the Government Outcomes Lab has been a partnership between the Blavatnik School of Government and the UK Government's directorate in charge of civil society (formerly called the Office for Civil Society and part of the Cabinet Office; now known as the Civil Society and Youth Directorate and located in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport - DCMS).

The partnership has been overseen throughout this time by our Partnership Group, which consists of the School's Dean and Vice-Dean, and the directorate's Director and Deputy Director / Head of Team. The success we have enjoyed has been possible only because of the dedicated funding and support provided by the School and the Directorate. This has enabled us to maintain a rich core of work that has been consistently funded over multiple years. We are grateful to our colleagues in the civil service for their enduring commitment to the partnership through a time of considerable disruption in government.

The partnership with DCMS has principally funded our UK domestic work. In our international work, we have benefited greatly from partnerships with the UK's foreign aid department (previously known as the Department for International Development, now known as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), and the UBS Optimus Foundation.

We have received dedicated research funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) several times, including a £1.2m, four-year Future Leaders Fellowship for our Research Director, Dr Eleanor Carter. We have delivered projects jointly with specialist consultancies the Behavioural Insights Team, Ecorys, and Social Finance. We have collaborated with academic institutions worldwide including the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation at the University of Cape Town, the Gov Lab at New York University, and the University of Sheffield.



UBS



UK Research and Innovation

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