

# Obsessive audits stop charities from doing their job

February 17 2015, by Ioannis Costas Batlle

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Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

The goal of youth-centred charities is to provide a [public benefit](#) by helping and caring for young people in a variety of ways. The public, government, and funders should do their best to support these charities,

not hinder them.

But instead of focusing on the process of helping the people they're meant to, these charities are being pressured to spend time measuring and publicising the outcomes of their activities. And if they're constantly forced to justify how they are doing what they're doing, it's hard to see how they will have room left to actually do it.

A growing culture of [measurement, transparency, and accountability](#) is obliging charities to shift their resources from front-line services towards providing painstaking justifications for all their actions.

Though these benchmarks obviously have a big part to play in the health of the voluntary sector, they cannot be the be all and end all. The excessive attention paid to them is starting to diminish (rather than enhance) the help and care youth charities in particular can offer.

The yardsticks are rarely questioned. But the current system does not provide a space for charities to devote themselves to front-line services and the processes that entails. For instance, there is rarely time for a charity to critically examine the implications of their programs or to carefully consider youths' needs.

## **Square peg, round hole**

The incessant drive for [transparency](#) and accountability [puts a stranglehold on charities' services](#). This is the equivalent of a car manufacturer diverting its efforts away from the production and development of cars towards continually justifying how cars are built, why particular components are used, and how the money is utilised. Clearly, the quality of their cars is likely to drop.

Even worse, the priorities of measurement, transparency, and

accountability lend themselves to a business world of figures and objectivity. Unfortunately, these yardsticks struggle to capture the complexity of human beings. It's not easy to say how one measures a relationship, or how to audit the quality of care offered by a charity when [young people](#)'s needs are so broad and diverse.

Reducing a charity's work to a series of measurable attributes is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole: if it's going to be done, one or the other will have to compromise.

In a stand-off between those with money (funders) and those without it (charities), it's obvious who will usually cave in. To ensure their survival, charities are forced to develop programs whose outcomes lend themselves to measurement and simple compartmentalisation. This means that the type of help youths receive is designed to meet these narrowly defined outcomes – and it leaves little or no room for intangible but hugely significant aspects, such as encouraging young people to care for each other or become critical thinkers.

Charities that work with young people lack the power to disregard society's strict enforcement of measurement, transparency, and accountability. Competition for funding is only getting fiercer given [the number of charities that exist](#) and the finite funds available.

Charities that excel at measurement, transparency, and accountability – which is not by any means synonymous with providing better services – are far likelier to attract donors' attention.

Examples of these processes at work are rife. The widely used [NPC well-being measure](#) markets itself as a tool for charities to quantify their work so they can demonstrate progress to funders. [Laureus Foundation research studies](#) aim to prove that sport initiatives can reduce youths' engagement in crime – a variable that can be measured financially,

whereas "personal development" or "caring behaviours" are too intangible.

The payment-by-results contracts these tools are helping charities win [condition and stifle service provision](#). They also force charities to re-align their priorities to those of their funders, while [silencing any potential dissent](#). After all, it's generally not wise to bite the hand that feeds you.

## Better than nothing?

Consequently, charities are being forced into a horrible choice. They can either abide by current yardsticks and diminish the quality of their services, or they can offer no services at all.

Some might say that providing a substandard service is better than offering none at all. This misses the point; like the argument that [a Nike contractor exploiting Indonesian workers by paying them \\$3.70/day](#) is better than the \$0/day they might otherwise be making. It legitimises the status quo by implicitly treating it as the best case scenario.

We should be trying to help charities focus on caring and helping youths, rather than unwittingly limiting the quality of services they can provide. I agree that measurement, transparency, and [accountability](#) are important standards for the voluntary sector, but they cannot be the only ones.

Professionals and volunteers who work for [charities](#) are rarely guided by financial ambitions or personal glory; they are generally driven by the desire to help young people. We should let them do this, and stop imposing constraints that diminish their efforts and burn them out.

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