

# Measures of Success

| BY FAYE WIGHTMAN, CEO, VANCOUVER FOUNDATION

Not everything  
that counts can  
be counted

There is a long-standing debate in philanthropy about measuring success and measuring impact. On the one hand, there is a recent trend toward thinking about the act of giving as a “return on investment” decision. A belief that the same rigour should be applied to charities and non-profits as is applied to those companies that manufacture widgets.

This push to apply business models to philanthropic decisions – to measure success, to try to understand and quantify the impact of a charitable gift – is completely understandable. Many donors have made their money in business. These donors expect results. They want to see the impact of their gift now, not later. They are looking for accountability. They want evidence of success. They want metrics.

And for some charitable projects this is eminently doable. In fact, gauging the effectiveness of some programs is deceptively simple. It’s easy to know how many children in Africa were

huge impacts, but they’re hard to quantify and may take a long time to realize – all this from a simple gift of a ball.

How do you measure the success of programs whose benefits will take weeks, months or even years to fully realize? How do you measure the value of funding a program where seniors learn skills to counsel their peers in dealing with grief, isolation or aging? Or where at-risk youth learn skills that could give them a new trade, and a new future?

The Man in the Moon program at Vancouver Public Library is a wonderful project that teaches male caregivers how to play games with and read to their young children. It encourages bonding between parent and child, and literacy skills in children.

The payoff of this program may be 20 years down the line, when (the research shows) those toddlers will probably grow up to be compassionate, more literate, better educated and more well-adjusted, and earn more than those infants who did not have exposure to such literacy programs. And the fathers will have better relationships with their children.

The efforts to find a common standard – the holy grail of metrics – have had mixed results. Here are two reasons why:

## How do you measure the success of programs whose benefits will take weeks, months or even years to fully realize?

inoculated by a particular program; or how many mosquito nets were distributed to protect against malaria; how many people were fed; how many homeless children were housed.

On the other hand, the impact of some types of philanthropy is much harder to measure. But the benefits, though more abstract, are no less real.

For example, Vancouver Foundation funds a program called Neighbourhood Small Grants. Last year, two residents of one of Vancouver’s poorer neighbourhoods observed local children kicking rocks in a field because they had no decent soccer balls to play with. These two residents got a Neighbourhood Small Grant from us and – for the “colossal” sum of \$400 – bought a bunch of soccer balls and basketballs to give away to local kids.

There was no detailed cost-benefit analysis, no follow-up to gauge the impact of this money. But if you measured success by simple enthusiasm, then this program was an overwhelming hit.

We’ve heard that one ball can keep 20 kids off the street. So, the benefits to these children should keep accruing – they are likely to stay physically active, and thus healthier. They are occupied, and therefore less likely to get street-involved. These are potentially

**A wide spectrum of projects:** At Vancouver Foundation we recognize that communities are complex, and that many factors go into creating a healthy and vibrant place to live. As a result, we fund a wide variety of projects in areas ranging from arts and culture to education, environment, animal welfare, children, youth and families, health and medical research and homelessness – hundreds of projects, each with its own unique objectives.

Some seek to house the homeless; others, to educate or entertain. Trying to find a single template that will effectively measure the success of funding both a new mainstage opera and a homework club for at-risk youth in Burnaby is a huge challenge.

**Varying timelines for ROI:** Charitable organizations operate on timelines that vary from immediate to very long term. For some, success means having enough food for anyone who needs a meal. For others, it is years of medical research that may or may not lead to a cure for a disease. That’s why it’s not always easy to apply pure metrics and measure the return on investment.

Supporters of metrics also often miss an important point – philanthropy has a real benefit to the donor that is just as difficult to measure. How do you quantify the joy and satisfaction people get from knowing they have contributed to the solution of a problem, or that they may have helped one, or five, or a dozen lives? The smiles on the faces of the two residents who gave away the soccer balls in East Vancouver were just as broad as the smiles of the children who received them.

What I have learned from three decades in the philanthropic sector is that not everything can be measured. As Albert Einstein said more than 50 years ago: “Not everything that can be counted, counts. And not everything that counts can be counted.” **VF**

