

The Glebe Project: Injecting evidence into matters of inequality

1. Summary of the impact

Despite Census data suggesting that Glebe ranks above the Australian income average, a closer look reveals that it is one of the Sydney suburbs with the highest rates of inequality.

At the same time, the many community organisations in the area are often constrained – through lack of time and funding – from evaluating whether their efforts are strategically addressing the underlying issues.

In response to this, a group of researchers came together to investigate whether the services provided in Glebe are matching up with the community needs. Thanks to this evidence base, the Glebe community is now better placed to decide how best to direct their capacity and funds.

2. Problem

With many residents requiring support services in the areas of education, health and housing, Glebe's demographics are deeply divided. Many in the community are concerned that a growing trend of inequality, especially in terms of income, is a threat to the community's social sustainability and coherence.

The lack of research into social impact is particularly affecting the many community organisations which are currently servicing the area. Due to limited resources, many organisations are predominantly focused on the day-to-day frontline services but cannot actually evaluate their reach and impact.

The implications of this are quite significant. As organisations progress their work based on their experience, they may lack the data required to decide how best to direct their resources and efforts. There is a risk that important support areas may remain underserved.

3. Beneficiaries

The direct beneficiaries of this initiative are community organisations in the Sydney Glebe area. This includes neighbourhood groups, volunteers, not-for-profit organisations, non-government organisations and privately funded groups.

The research efforts ultimately serve to benefit the Glebe community as a whole by improving services available to residents who need assistance.

4. Approach to impact

As part of the wider Glebe Society community initiative, the project was launched in response to the research and analysis needs of community service providers in the area. Senior Research Analyst at the Business School, Dr Gillian McAllister, joined the project to support the evidence gathering process.

Dr McAllister worked with local organisations to draw a preliminary map of the community network which outlines which services are currently available and which organisations are linked. According to Dr McAllister, while this map requires further development, mapping out the status quo was an important first step to understanding current practices and how service providers are currently operating.

As a second step, the team consulted and gathered publicly available statistics on health, education, demographics and crime to gain a deeper understanding of the Glebe residents and their needs. To better organise the data, the information was broken down into lifecycles to assess the needs of Glebe residents in various stages of their lives, for instance, while at pre-school or during retirement.

While Dr McAllister acknowledges that the analysis is not perfect, she was able to match up the various lifecycle needs and consolidate these with the map of services available. The early findings have already proven to be useful in identifying some of the gaps in services or areas which may require more attention.

For instance, the population data shows that a high proportion of Glebe residents speak languages other than English at home, indicating that there is a significant educational need to support English language development among school children. When consulting the preliminary service provision data, a comparatively small number of initiatives had been identified which focus on this issue. Similar conclusions are emerging about educational support in the transition from primary to high school, which is a time when many students struggle.

The project is still in progress, and while no final conclusions have been drawn, local organisations are already benefitting from the emerging evidence.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

According to Dr McAllister, the key outcome of her work is a 'first cut' of evidence which helps to start an informed conversation about the inequality issues affecting the Glebe community. A community-driven

collective impact initiative is using the data as the foundation upon which the shared agenda is built.

Her data sets and visual map outline the various community organisations currently operating in Glebe, as well as their function, affiliations and services.

While Dr McAllister argues there is much to be added and refined, the map is the first of its kind and sheds light on the way the network is currently set up.

As a result of this initiative, community groups in Glebe are now better placed to work together and more strategically in addressing the residents' needs.

5.2. Impact

The project is still in progress and is creating an important foundation which continues to be built in order to achieve the desired impact. However, the team hopes that by improving services for residents in one area, they make a small but important contribution to the greater goal – a more equal Australian society.

Despite its limited scope, the approach to impact set in this example is quite noteworthy for tackling the larger problem at hand.

Dr McAllister argues that collecting facts and evidence are vital in addressing any social issue and starting a conversation, rather than relying on assumptions and opinions. This is particularly important for government decisions which have a real impact on the everyday lives of people and potentially make or break their trajectory.

Dr McAllister explains that using evidence as a starting point for funding and policy decisions is particularly critical.

In this era of “Fake News”, Dr McAllister is particularly driven to hold decision-makers accountable and use her work to inject evidence into important debates.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

With many years of research experience under her belt, Dr McAllister says her rational nature has served her well in supporting government initiatives and academic endeavours.

Her concern about Australia’s growing inequality is a key driver, and much of her recent efforts have been dedicated to the aid sector, community engagement and social innovation. In particular, supporting the creativity and ideas of social enterprises which drive social change continues to motivate her research efforts.

Among the many collaborators, her work was particularly supported by Glebe Society Vice President John Gray as well as Kerry Graham who is the Founder and Director of Collaboration for Impact.

6.2. External enabling factors

This research initiative in Glebe was initially launched as an independent community project, driven by the Glebe Society and its Vice President John Gray.

A number of groups and organisations in and around Glebe have already been providing long-standing support, including the University of Sydney

which has been running its Glebe Community Development Project since 2004.

Although Dr McAllister joined the team as an independent researcher in 2017, the UTS Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion has since become a collaborator as part of its Social Impact Framework.

With its ongoing commitment to supporting communities within its precinct, UTS has been providing ongoing support for statistical research and dissemination of the gathered information.

7. Challenges

Dr McAllister considers her work to be exciting and motivating. However, there are a couple of challenges which she believes all researchers face.

Aside from battling the trend of 'Fake News' by being an advocate for rigorous research, she sometimes finds herself challenged by project restrictions that limit the scope or reach of her work.

Within the university context, some projects never make it to fruition as they do not align with the institution's current research needs and funding provisions. A particular restriction in the corporate field is that while some research findings have great value and could be vital for policy debates, they may have to remain confidential and cannot be published.

As with the Glebe Project, Dr McAllister works around these challenges by investigating independently and trying to bring onboard research partners who are willing to collaborate on projects that will serve the public.

8. References

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