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A reflection on the Social Value Spotlight by Cara Mulholland



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In September 2016 ARCOM convened in Manchester – the birth place of the industrial revolution – to discuss ‘Construction Work and the Worker’. We had many interesting presentations putting the worker, the people, at the fore of construction management. The rise and fall of construction is closely tied to the economy of a country. When coming through the recession in the UK focus was on encouraging community growth, which in ways helped spawn the Public Services (Social Value) Act (2012). So this ties up nicely with the growing concern of social issues, and ARCOM’s spotlight on Social Value. But I saw the issue of Social Value appeared in many ways over the 3 days, in different contexts and from across countries.

There were many mentions of sustainable business, how including social value makes sense for sustainable work, or why unfair business is bad for business. There was work looking at Indigenous construction in Australia, examining issues of inclusion; then the reasons for and broader implications of New Zealand’s housing shortage. In the vocational training session they discussed employment and training outcomes which affect the worker directly, linking back to Linda Clarke’s discussion of the keynote about the importance of paying more attention to the role of labour in the construction industry.

Returning back to the Social Value Spotlight, each of the speakers brought attention to the much neglected area of social value in construction. Fady Farag proposed a framework to improve and include social value at all stages of construction projects; Sylvia Hammond brought the interesting and complex issue of informal roadside work-seekers, how they keep dignity and raised the question of whether formalisation of sectors is really for the greater good; Daniella Petersen showed some concrete results of a big player in the construction industry actively participating in social procurement, addressing housing and employment issues for the marginalised migrant communities; and Jemma Bridgeman gave

some great reflections on a successful Social Returns on Investment (SROI) project that has gone on to be used in giving a voice to the young service users of her charity. There was very little to suggest that Social Value can be seen as anything other than crucial and necessary, to the point that it seems illogical this leg of sustainability has been left to fall behind the economic and environmental practices adopted by construction organisations and in broader conversations.

The discussants, Professors Chris Gorse and Martin Loosemore, raised the topics of gender inequality and racial discrimination as example of sub-agendas which are so difficult to step away from, fully wrapped up in the Social Value of works. This is where bureaucracy has stepped in officially in countries such as the USA and Australia with quotas to be met. It can also be seen within the UK itself in the Northern Ireland context. But it needs to be questioned whether these official regulations are doing enough to address issues. And if organisations are doing the minimum required, is that Social Value being enacted? The idea of Social Value needs to go beyond this.

We need to stop drawing distinct lines between the 3 pillars of sustainability, and realise that economic and environmental issues are intrinsically socially valuable as well. We need to expand how we view ‘social’. It is something that impacts every part of society and lives. The value of a project may in fact be in the intangible outcomes such as the provision of beautiful, green spaces for wellbeing, or changing the atmosphere of an area. Perhaps because of the intangible nature of social value, Martin Loosemore reminded us in opening up the spotlight session that “social value is something that cannot be defined. It means something different to everybody. This makes regulating it challenging and questionable. Social Value is not something that can be reduced to a protocol. It should be embodied and felt, and not necessarily measured. Fady added that this is not something that should be a tick-box exercise. So why are we trying to fit it in to these calculative procedures – that is only one way to ensure it is involved in a project. Social Value is a socially-constructed concept, ever-changing depending on positioning. Social Value needs to be an ongoing, narrative, storytelling process. Can we accept the intangible, the emotive – trusting feelings and intuitions – not as a weakness, but as a strength? Is there scope to open up space for people to bring values to the decision making process in all stages of work, and for giving the worker more stake in this? Perhaps the spotlight is just the starting point for these questions and conversations so that, as one conference participant noted, we can “move from knowledge to wisdom”.