Social outcomes contracts & system strengthening

A conceptual framework

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Social Finance UK is a not-for-profit organisation that partners with governments, service providers, the voluntary sector and the financial community. Together, we find better ways of tackling social problems in the UK and globally.

Social Finance's vision is a fairer world. Where together we unleash the potential of people and communities.

Louise Savell

Louise Savell is co-founder and Director of Social Finance. She jointly leads their international development team where she advises governments, philanthropies and service providers on the design and delivery of social development programmes. Louise is passionate about driving social impact through rigorous analysis, efficient structures and effective cross-sector partnerships. She has particular expertise in outcomes-based approaches and social investment structures. She co-developed the Impact Bond model in 2008. Louise has led social outcomes work across a range of sectors and geographies including Sleeping Sickness in Uganda; Education in Ghana and Liberia; Early Childhood Development in China, South Africa and Cameroon; Energy Access in India; and Street Children in Ethiopia. She has also led the development of social outcomes programmes in the UK in the fields of homelessness, youth employment and health.

The Government Outcomes Lab is a research and policy centre based in the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford. We were created as a partnership between the School and the UK Government and we are funded by a range of organisations. Our role is to investigate how governments partner with the private and social sectors to improve social outcomes.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

"Increasing public-private capacities for more effectively serving vulnerable populations and holding programmes accountable, politically and contractually, for longer-term outcomes and impacts – if we achieve that, it would be a major public management contribution of these efforts."

(Heinrich J. C., 2018)

Since the launch in 2010 of the first investment-backed social outcomes contract in the UK (the Peterborough Reoffending Social Impact Bond), over 250 such contracts have been launched worldwide (Government Outcomes Lab, 2022). These contracts have targeted better outcomes across a range of sectors and populations, with a particular focus on education, employment and health.

Initially conceived by Social Finance as an impact investment structure to support the UK social sector to participate in results-based contracts, interest in social outcomes contracts has grown among government and social sector stakeholders, at least in part due to an increasing recognition that the more standard provider-activity milestones that pay-for-results contracts are often based on (e.g. training courses delivered or patients seen), are often only loosely connected to longer term service user outcomes and impact, and sometimes negatively so (Heinrich & Kabourek, 2019).

Social Outcomes Contracts offer the potential to shift this focus, by basing payments on longer-term service user outcomes and impact, and in doing so opening-up space for service innovation and adaptation to deliver those results. As their use has expanded, however, questions have arisen about whether and how timebound and tightly defined social outcomes contracts fit within and could support broader, longer-term capacity building around effective policy implementation at the country and system level. Whilst thinking around how social outcomes contracts might contribute to strengthening policy implementation is being discussed increasingly by practitioners in the space, little has been written on potential pathways for capacity building through social outcomes contracts to date (Government Outcomes Lab, 2021).

This paper is an attempt to consolidate early thinking into a conceptual framework for use by researchers and evaluators, as well as practitioners and governments. The paper was funded by a GO Lab grant from the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and hence

focuses on examples from low- and middle-income countries. However, the framework also includes insights from and has relevance to higher income country contexts.

From a review of the literature, the paper proposes three drivers of resilience and impact within social outcomes contracts: greater cross-sector alignment, outcomes-focused delivery and engaged governance (Figure 1). It then moves from this to propose a conceptual framework for longer-term system strengthening involving two primary pathways (Figure 2). The first pathway relates to the ways in which lessons from the flexible and adaptive delivery of better outcomes, through social outcomes contracts focused on particular sectors and populations, might drive improved policy and service design more broadly. The second pathway relates to the ways in which social outcomes contracts might shift broader ways of working in relation to policy implementation practices like commissioning, contracting, contract management and programme governance to make them more outcomes-focused. In both cases, the focus of the framework is on change that is broader in scope and longer-term than any given social outcomes contract.

The mechanisms and pathways proposed in the framework require empirical validation, but the framework itself can already be used to generate a number of research questions for hypothesis generation and empirical study (see Section 8). The framework may also, in time, support the integration and articulation of findings from studies across a range of contexts.

Importantly, in the immediate term, the framework can support practitioners and governments to more deeply and explicitly consider their system strengthening ambitions and theories of change when designing and implementing social outcomes contracts and other programmes. In light of emerging evidence from mainstream RBF that poorly designed or implemented programmes can weaken rather than strengthen system capacity (Paul E. , et al., 2018), there is a strong case for the such a conceptual framework to support the consideration of potential system effects during social outcome contract design, and to support the evaluation of the system strengthening impact of existing and future social outcomes contracts.

We hope that it will be a valuable contribution to thinking in the field. It will doubtless be the first of many iterations to come. While this work is hard and the timeframes are long, it is an important endeavour.

"Government policy is like an oil tanker, and we're in the business of turning an oil tanker around. [Social outcomes contracts] are tugboats: they're nimble and can change direction easily. It's a labor-intensive process to shift the direction of an oil tanker, but it's worth it. Once you've shifted the oil tanker, that's a lot of power moving in a different direction."

Savell cited by Ainsworth (2022)

1. Social outcomes contracts & system strengthening

Social outcomes contracts[i] (SOC)

Social outcomes contracts are a sub-set of payment-by-results instruments that tie service provider payments to pre-agreed measures of social and / or environmental outcomes (Picker, et al., 2021)[i]. They differ from other forms of results-based-finance or payment-by results contracts by shifting the focus to "*the positive results that services produce in the lives of service users and citizens – rather than the volume or quality of inputs or outputs*" (op. cit.).

The term 'social outcomes contract' covers a range of instruments including, but not limited to social and development impact bonds, in which investors provide the upfront capital for the delivery of services by non-state providers ahead of payments for outcomes.[ii]

> "*Key components therefore include: independent, non-governmental delivery agents; contracted provision; and payment contingent on outcomes performance/results achieved.*" (op.cit.)

Social outcomes contracts have generated considerable interest since the launch of the first Social Impact Bond, focused on reducing reoffending among prison leavers, by Social Finance in 2010. The GO Lab INDIGO knowledge hub indicates that 227 SOCs have been launched to date worldwide, across a broad range of sectors and geographies (GO Lab INDIGO database, accessed 26.02.22).

While a systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of social outcomes contracts is ongoing, the rationale for their use is intuitively compelling (Picker, et al., 2021). In principle, paying for service user outcomes not only creates financial incentives to drive better outcomes, but also creates space for adaptive service delivery that responds to changing delivery contexts and service user needs[iii]. Social outcomes contracts are fixed-term in nature and tend to be 2-5 years in duration. SOCs launched to date have focused particularly on driving better outcomes in employment, child and family welfare, health, homelessness and education (GO Lab INDIGO database, accessed 26.02.22).

System Strengthening

The term 'system strengthening' is most commonly used in relation to the provision of healthcare in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In that context, 'system' tends to be broadly defined to include public and private sectors, communities and families, health financing bodies, pharmaceutical companies, etc. Systems are understood as complex adaptive systems that are continually reorganising in both formal and informal ways (Tichenor & Sridhar, 2017) (Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research, 2009). The endpoint of system strengthening efforts in this context tends to be broadly defined, in terms of progress towards universal health coverage, rather than progress around a particular disease or care pathway (Tichenor & Sridhar, 2017).

As social outcomes contracts operate across a range of populations and sectors, a broader definition is required for the purposes of this paper. Borrowing from Andrews, Pritchett & Woolcock (2016), it is perhaps helpful to think of the endpoint of system strengthening in relation to SOCs as '***capability for policy implementation***' or, put another way, **capability to deliver effective services to meet population needs** (Andrews, Pritchett, & Woolcock, 2016). The need for such system strengthening in LMICs is made clear by their research. Of the 102 historically developing countries that they review, they assess almost half (49) to have very weak or weak state policy implementation capabilities. Furthermore, 36 of the 49 are judged to have deteriorating, rather than improving policy implementation capabilities in recent decades (op.cit.). Such a definition of 'system strengthening' is aligned with the broader literature on 'delivery approaches' which shift the focus from policy development to policy delivery in recognition of the substantial challenges many governments face in this regard (Williams, et al., 2021). Whilst this literature focuses on policy implementation challenges in LMIC contexts, mechanisms to improve policy implementation have also been a focus in many HICs through initiatives like Delivery Units.

Given the cross-sector nature of SOCs it makes sense to think of policy implementation capability in terms of the service delivery ecosystem as a whole – including for-profit and non-profit non-state providers – rather than limiting considerations to state capability alone. As we will come to discuss later, strengthening state capabilities to effectively harness the skills and resources of non-state service providers to implement policy objectives may be an important system strengthening mechanism of SOCs.

Finally, this paper aims to consider the 'legacy effects' of social outcomes contracts, by which we mean what is left behind in terms of system strengthening – specifically, improved policy implementation capacity – beyond the term of any given social outcomes contract. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, there is emerging evidence from mainstream results-based financing (RBF) in health, that much of the outcomes improvement is lost once financial incentives fall away (Savell et. al., 2022)[iv]. Secondly, there is some argument that, if too little care is given to system-wide and long-term effects, RBF can actually weaken delivery systems and services, particularly where such programmes are strongly donor- as opposed to government-led (Paul E. , et al., 2018).

Structure of this paper

Beyond a handful of recent practitioner discussions, little consideration has so far been given to the mechanisms and circumstances through which social outcomes contracts might support a journey of system strengthening, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Airoldi, et al., 2021) (Averseng, et al., 2021) (Gustafsson-Wright & Osborne, 2020) (Kwok, et al., 2021). Given the significant and growing need for improved policy implementation capability in many LMICs countries, this could be considered a material blind spot among the growing community of SOC practitioners and funders.

At present, despite the stated ambition of many social outcomes contracts to generate system-level benefits beyond the term and scope of the social outcomes contracts themselves, their potential in this area has not been robustly assessed to date.

The remainder of this paper:

    2. Introduces existing thinking around key mechanisms for system strengthening;

3. Considers the core characteristics of social outcomes contracts;

4. Considers the mechanisms through which SOC might support system strengthening;

5. Proposes a preliminary conceptual framework for thinking about how SOC might contribute to system strengthening;

6. Considers circumstances that may influence the system strengthening impact of SOCs;

7. Considers illustrative examples of system strengthening from completed SOCs; and

8. Considers how researchers, practitioners and policy makers might apply the conceptual framework to support their work.

2. Mechanisms for system strengthening

Systems theory and thinking is a well-established field, particularly in high income countries:

> "*There is a growing body of historical knowledge about how systems have changed over time. What is lacking is practical knowledge to show how systems can be changed deliberately and how new systems can be brought into being.*" (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020)

While 'system' is often either vaguely defined and / or all encompassing within much of the literature on systems change, for the purposes of this paper, we focus specifically on system strengthening in terms of increased policy implementation capability.

Drawing on a comparative analysis of 24 public initiatives in Brazil, India and South Africa, Lazzarini et. al. (2020) set out to explain the conditions that led to high performance in terms of evidenced positive outcomes for target populations. They identify two paths to high performance: "*a path with higher private engagement involves concurrent collaborations with for-profit and non-profit actors, whereas an alternative path with higher internal (public) engagement relies on collaborations within the public bureaucracy complemented by high permeability to inputs from multiple stakeholders.*" (Lazzarini et al., 2020)

Social outcomes contracts vary significantly in their size, structure and intent, but at their heart they are cross-sector partnerships. As such the first pathway may have particular relevance. Central conditions for high performance in this 'external engagement' pathway include strong public operational capacity and collaboration with non-profit organisations. Involvement of for-profit organisations, collaboration between public units and stakeholder orientation were also identified as contributing factors, but not considered central in all scenarios (op. cit.).

Interestingly, where for-profit providers were involved, non-profits were seen as key actors in selecting partners that were aligned with the social objectives of the project. Non-profit managers also supported stakeholder engagement to drive learning around the needs of the target group. Importantly, strong public capacity was identified as a necessary condition in all high-performance pathways (op.cit.).

In terms of strengthening public sector capacity, the last 20 years have seen delivery approaches (variously known as delivery units, innovation units and reform teams) being used by governments across the world to improve policy delivery by improving bureaucratic functioning. Williams et. al. (2021) define a 'delivery approach' as: *"an institutionalized unit or structured process within a government bureaucracy that aims to rapidly improve bureaucratic functioning and policy delivery by combining a set of managerial functions in a novel way to shift attention from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes."* (Williams, et al., 2021) Their assessment of policy literature around such approaches concludes that empirical evidence around the drivers of effectiveness of such units is limited. However, they identify five sets of functions that such units can draw on in different ways to achieve their objectives:

1. Target setting and prioritisation;
2. Measurement and monitoring;
3. Leveraging political sponsorship;
4. Accountability and incentives; and
5. Problem solving.

Such thinking echoes the approach of the World Bank's Program-for-Results, which now accounts for around 15% of the Bank's annual lending (~$18bn pa, equivalent to around 80% of all results-based donor financing) (Kenyon, 2022). Whilst not explicitly outcomes-based, the Program-for-Results aims not only to support programme results, but also to consider and strengthen all actors in the service delivery chain: *"it means being more attentive to who needs to do what in the entire service delivery chain, and whether they have the resources, information, and motivation to do it."* (op. cit.).

Kenyon (2022), speaks specifically about the importance, within the Program-for-Results, of improvements in government: *"(i) monitoring and collection of data; (ii) demand for and use of data; (iii) incentives for achieving results; and (iv) adaptive management and learning."* (Kenyon, 2022) He describes these as 'the components of a results-based management system'. However, he also notes the limited existing evidence around what works to achieve substantive and sustained change, citing the inherently political nature of working with government systems for financial management, procurement and human resources.

The importance of political engagement and support at all levels of the system has been noted in a range of social outcomes contract literature, as well as more broadly in research around cross-sector collaborations and system reform (Glitterman, Britto, Shah, & Khan, 2021) (Khan, 2017) (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020). Khan (2017) goes as far as to say*: "I would argue that one of the biggest differentiators between success and failure in driving system change is whether the emotional dynamics of what it takes for people to change behaviours are factored into the change strategy."* He writes of the importance of considering the informal parts of the system – the values, networks and sources of pride that drive behaviour – alongside formal goals, strategies and processes (Khan, 2017).

Winhall and Leadbeater (2020) note a similar dynamic, stating, *"systems are often hard to change because power, relationships, and resources are locked together in a reinforcing pattern according to the current purpose. Systems start to change when this pattern is disrupted and opened up."* (Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020).

3. Core characteristics of social outcomes contracts

"Purpose is the master key especially in public systems. We think innovation in systems for public good should realign resources, relationships and power around a new conception of what a system should be for, the outcomes it seeks to create for society."

(Leadbeater & Winhall, 2020)

Social outcomes contracts are differentiated from other forms of results-based finance, by the shift in accountability that is created by linking payments to service user outcomes as opposed to inputs or activities (Picker, et al., 2021). This shift, theoretically, enables scope for greater operational flexibility to deliver contractual outcomes, driven by a focus on continuous learning and adaptation, and underpinned by real-time data.

In 2015 Gustafsson-Wright et. al identified '10 common claims' made by market participants about what investor-backed social outcomes contracts (Impact Bonds) are able to achieve and why. These claims included reducing delivery risks to government, crowding in private funding, driving performance management and incentivising collaboration. These claims have subsequently been compared, by the Brookings Institution and others, against emerging insights from independent evaluations of individual social outcomes contracts. However, robust evidence around drivers of effectiveness for social outcomes contracts remains limited (Gustaffson-Wright, Boggild-Jones, Segell, & Durland, 2017) (Gustafsson-Wright, Massey, & Osborne, 2020) (Gustafsson-Wright, Gardiner, & Putcha, 2015) (Picker, et al., 2021).

More recently, building on insights shared by more than 85 stakeholders on 6 continents around the drivers of both resilience and impact within social outcomes contracts during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Savell & Airoldi (2020) identified three core principles from social outcomes contracts that could be used to strengthen future programmes (Savell & Airoldi, 2020). Extrapolating from these principles, three core characteristics of social outcomes contracts can be identified, each in turn underpinned by three drivers (Figure 1). In addition to underpinning impact within any given social outcomes contract, these can also be thought about as underpinning the mechanisms by which social outcomes contracts could potentially support capacity building at a state or system level.

The first characteristic of social outcomes contracts, **cross-sector alignment**, relates to the central role of a shared definition of success across a diverse range of funding and delivery partners. This alignment of vision and objectives is core to designing, delivering and coordinating effective services for the target population. At its heart is the recognition that addressing many complex social problems requires stakeholders from the public, private and non-profit spheres to work together. Beyond a shared definition of success around the objectives of social service delivery, the potential role of well-designed financial incentives (payments for outcomes) in resolving and aligning potentially competing public and private values is recognised.

The second characteristic of social outcomes contracts, **outcomes focused delivery**, speaks to the opportunity for adaptive delivery of services that stems from the contractual specification of the desired programme outcomes, with no or little prescription around how those outcomes are to be achieved. Key to using this flexibility to optimise service user outcomes is the use of real-time data to inform learning and service adaptation. Data collection, analysis and interpretation are important inputs that enable learning about who was reached, what impact services had and who is being left behind.

Finally, the third characteristic of social outcomes contracts, **engaged governance**, speaks to the importance of shifting programme accountability towards outcomes. This is the decision-making forum or fora – generally involving two or more of an outcome funder, service provider and investor – that reviews progress towards the shared definition of success with up to date data around what is being achieved. The value of strong stakeholder relationships and active governance in social outcomes contracts was particularly evident during the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Multi-stakeholder governance enabled accountability for service user outcomes, shared learning around opportunities and constraints to realising better outcomes, and rapid course correction to respond to contextual changes as they occurred.

In combination, these three 'engines' drive the impact potential of social outcomes contracts.

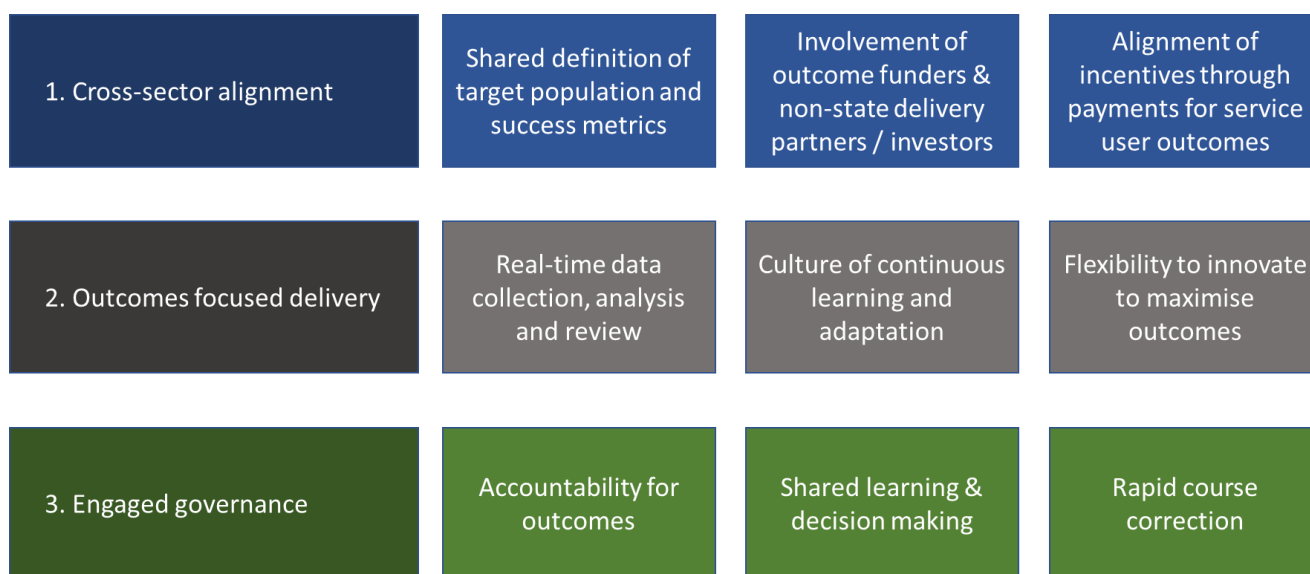| 1. Cross-sector alignment	Shared definition of target population and success metrics	Involvement of outcome funders & non-state delivery partners / investors	Alignment of incentives through payments for service user outcomes
2. Outcomes focused delivery	Real-time data collection, analysis and review	Culture of continuous learning and adaptation	Flexibility to innovate to maximise outcomes
3. Engaged governance	Accountability for outcomes	Shared learning & decision making	Rapid course correction

Figure 1: Drivers of resilience and impact within social outcomes contracts (based on Savell & Airoldi, 2020)

4. Ways in which social outcomes contracts may support system strengthening

As noted in the introduction, little has been written to date about the ways in which social outcomes contracts might drive system strengthening in terms of policy implementation capacity. What little has been written has focused on how to strengthen the capacity of ecosystems to launch more social outcomes contracts or outcomes funds, rather than on how social outcomes contracts themselves might support system strengthening.

In their 2020 paper, Gustafsson-Wright et. al. consider, among other things, the potential 'ecosystem effect of impact bonds' (Gustafsson-Wright & Osborne, 2020). These include: *"innovation in service delivery, improved systems of monitoring and evaluation and performance management capacity, and an increase in collaboration between stakeholders"* (ibid.). They also cite examples of intentions to create 'ecosystem-level change' through specific Impact Bond initiatives. For example, the intent of the Quality Education India DIB to drive insights about *"the effectiveness of different interventions for possible future scale, as well as to provide capacity development and improvement for service providers and other education stakeholders"* (op.cit.). The Outcomes Fund for Education Results (OFFER) that is currently under development in Colombia shares a similar ambition (Urrea & Garcia, 2022), as does the Atmah SIB in Abu Dhabi (Sin, 2021).

Discussions among practitioners involved in designing, contracting and delivering social outcomes contracts have also been increasingly focused on the ways in which they may drive system strengthening. A recent webinar (Kwok, et al., 2021), focused on scaling and sustaining impact from the Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC) DIB in Cameroon, noted the importance of government involvement in social outcomes contract design, delivery and governance to creating a sense of ownership that ultimately led to the integration of the KMC approach within national neonatal care policies and clinical training curricula, and efforts to include continued financial incentives within the Ministry of Public Health's mainstream RBF programme.

Perhaps the richest discussion of system strengthening mechanisms to date took place at the Government Outcomes (GO) Lab's 2021 Social Outcomes Conference panel on pathways 'from pilot to system change' (Averseng, et al., 2021). During the panel, thirteen discussants from around the world noted the critical importance of, among other things:

- Political and technical champions;
- Systematic data collection, collation and analysis;
- Active stakeholder engagement and governance processes to align priorities, build trust and enable effective cross-sector partnerships;
- Provider capacity to deliver effective services to the target population;
- A cultural shift towards accountability for outcomes and a focus on change as a driver of improvement; and

- Changes to legal and regulatory frameworks to enable flexible delivery and payment by results.

The similarities between these factors, and those identified by Williams et. al. (2021) as potential drivers of Delivery Unit effectiveness (see Section 2 above), is notable (Williams, et al., 2021).

Gungadurdoss (2021) might argue that this is unsurprising: "*While impact bonds and RBF may sound complicated or exotic, they are about deploying simple, sensible, and performance-critical delivery management practices: clarify, articulate, and incentivize target outcomes; provide necessary autonomy to front-line staff; measure progress; reward good performance; and repeat these steps.*" (Gungadurdoss, 2021)

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is a rich development literature analysing how contextual considerations, like political structures, institutional history and social capital, impact the pace and extent of system learning around policy formulation and implementation. We consider these in more detail in Section 6, but first propose a conceptual framework for thinking about how social outcomes contracts might contribute to system strengthening.

5. A conceptual framework for social outcomes contracts & system strengthening

There is value in developing a conceptual framework for understanding and studying the impact of social outcomes contracts on system strengthening, even though a framework, in and of itself, cannot provide answers around whether social outcomes contracts are currently effective at achieving this objective, or indeed how they can be made most or even more effective.

A framework may, however, provide a helpful structure for the development of a set of research questions and analytical hypotheses that can be studied across a range of contexts to build our understanding of the mechanisms and circumstances through which social outcomes contracts might support a journey of system strengthening. It may also support SOC commissioners and practitioners to be more cognisant of system strengthening opportunities and levers in the design of future social outcome contracts.

Such system strengthening could have significant benefits beyond simply facilitating the launch of future SOCs, potentially supporting more effective deployment and management of traditional grants and fee-for-service contracts too.

The framework we propose in Figure 2 draws heavily on, among other things, our recent work with GO Lab to consolidate market knowledge around the factors influencing ecosystem readiness for outcomes contracts (Social Finance, 2022). It is not proposed that all social outcomes contracts will create all system strengthening effects, nor that such effects could only result from the use of social outcomes contracts. Rather, the framework aims to set-out plausible ways in which policy implementation might be strengthened through ecosystem engagement – particularly by national governments – in the development and use of social outcomes contracts building on the drivers to social outcome contract impact and resilience outlined in Figure 1.

The framework proposes two pathways through which social outcomes contracts might have system strengthening effects. These pathways are not mutually exclusive, although one may take precedence over the other in the design or implementation of any given social outcomes contract or outcomes fund. Key elements of the framework are outlined below.

It is important to note that – as with other forms of RBF – it is probable that introducing social outcomes contracts without careful attention to existing systems could plausibly have a system weakening effect by bypassing, delegitimatising or undermining existing institutions and non-state actors. This is not considered in detail in this paper, but should remain an important consideration for evaluations of SOCs.

Inputs and Activities

The inputs and activities outlined in Figure 2 may take place as an integral part of the development and implementation of specific social outcomes contracts or outcomes funds, and / or may result from additional investment by governments, donor agencies and / or philanthropies with a view to expanding the use of social outcomes contracts or outcomes funds more broadly.

The framework is intentionally non-prescriptive about the types of stakeholder that might initiate, own or lead particular inputs and activities as we have seen this take different forms in different SOCs and country contexts. Engaged stakeholders might include outcomes funders (governments, donor agencies or philanthropies), service providers, impact investors, evaluators or data managers, and specialist intermediaries with expertise in SOC design, contracting and delivery.

Outcomes Pathway 1: Social outcomes contracts & improved policy and service design

This pathway reflects the stated intent of many social outcomes contracts to not only deliver better outcomes for service users within the term of a given contract, but also – through adaptive, outcomes-focused delivery of services – to inform broader policy and service design, for particular populations and outcomes, for future delivery at scale. In essence, this pathway considers how lessons from social outcomes contracts influence the design of policy and services to improve their effectiveness.

Outputs for this pathway include refined service design and delivery approaches; and context appropriate training, resources, tools and practices, informed by the lessons of delivering improved service user outcomes through social outcomes contracts.

It might be hypothesised that, to realise the potential system strengthening benefits of social outcomes contracts through this pathway, it may be necessary to evaluate and understand not only whether better social outcomes are generated by social outcomes contracts, but also how better outcomes are delivered in terms of training, management approaches and other key features of service design like adaptations for sub-sections of the target population.

Outcomes Pathway 2: Social outcomes contracts & improved policy implementation

This pathway reflects the shifts in commissioning, contracting, contract management and service delivery practices – particularly those related to practices around data-driven service delivery, cross-sector partnership and outcomes-focused governance (see Figure 1) – that are required to effectively design, launch and deliver social outcomes contracts. In essence, how practices required to design, launch and manage social outcomes contracts might create shifts in how policy implementation is managed towards a more outcomes-based way of working.

Outputs for this pathway align with the SOC drivers of resilience and impact outlined in Figure 1 and include strengthened mechanisms for creating and managing cross-sector partnerships; strengthened capacity for data-driven service delivery, learning and innovation; and strengthened systems and processes to create both individual and collective accountability for the outcomes of service delivery.

These practice shifts could take place at a number of levels (i.e. regional, national or local) and within a range of public institutions, non-profit and private sector organisations. These might include, but not be limited to, outcomes funders (governments, donor agencies or philanthropies), service providers, impact investors and evaluators.

It might be hypothesised that to create sustained system strengthening with the potential to influence policy implementation at scale, particularly where this requires regulatory reform, national governments would need to be engaged and involved to some degree.
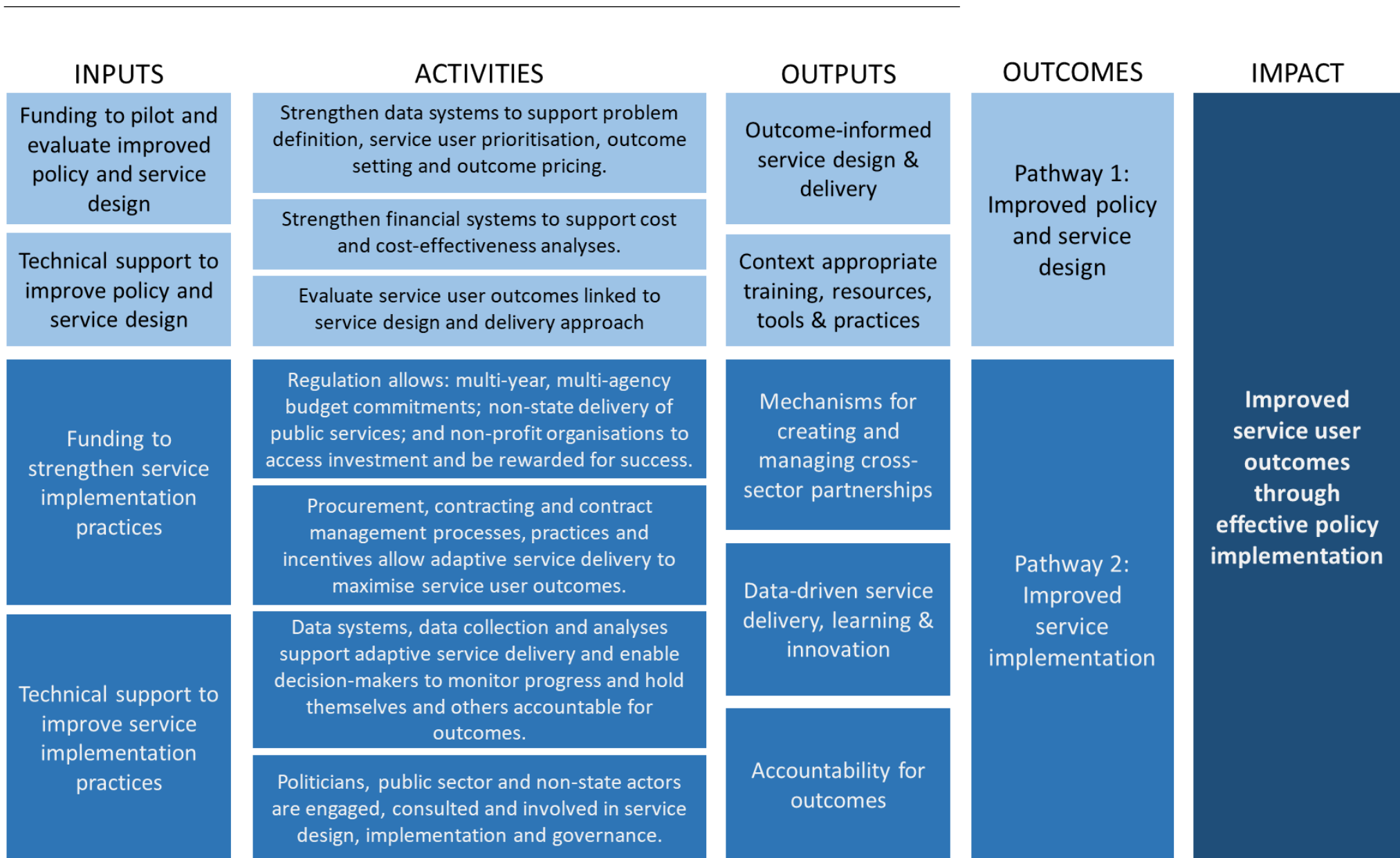
INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACT
Funding to pilot and evaluate improved policy and service design	Strengthen data systems to support problem definition, service user prioritisation, outcome setting and outcome pricing.	Outcome-informed service design & delivery	Pathway 1: Improved policy and service design	Improved service user outcomes through effective policy implementation
Technical support to improve policy and service design	Strengthen financial systems to support cost and cost-effectiveness analyses.	Context appropriate training, resources, tools & practices		
	Evaluate service user outcomes linked to service design and delivery approach			
Funding to strengthen service implementation practices	Regulation allows: multi-year, multi-agency budget commitments; non-state delivery of public services; and non-profit organisations to access investment and be rewarded for success.	Mechanisms for creating and managing cross-sector partnerships	Pathway 2: Improved service implementation	
	Procurement, contracting and contract management processes, practices and incentives allow adaptive service delivery to maximise service user outcomes.	Data-driven service delivery, learning & innovation		
Technical support to improve service implementation practices	Data systems, data collection and analyses support adaptive service delivery and enable decision-makers to monitor progress and hold themselves and others accountable for outcomes.			
	Politicians, public sector and non-state actors are engaged, consulted and involved in service design, implementation and governance.	Accountability for outcomes		

Figure 2: A conceptual framework for social outcomes contracts and system strengthening

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6. Circumstances that may influence the system strengthening impact of social outcomes contracts

"A country's distinctive political and institutional arrangements result in a distinctive set of incentives and constraints on decision making and thus distinctive trajectories of change."

(Levy, 2014)

Analysis of mainstream Performance Based Financing (PBF) indicates that, while such approaches have the potential to create system-wide change around human resource allocation, financial management, data usage and programme governance, they often do not live up to such promises (Paul et. al., 2017). It is argued that this is often due to implementation being dissociated from existing institutions, and that a lack of domestic government ownership can limit PBF's system-wide and long-terms effects (op.cit.). This is something that social outcomes contracts in LMICs should be alive to, as only 6 out of the 23 SOCs launched in LMICs to date SOCs, and in only 4 countries, have involved national or local government in the country of implementation as a contractual party[v]. Efforts to ensure that attention is focused not only on the short-term results of SOCs, but also on their contribution to broader system strengthening and reforms should be made. Tools like the recently developed *Engaging in outcomes-based partnerships: a framework to support government and ecosystem readiness framework* may support this (Social Finance, 2022).

Reflecting on her time as Director of the White House Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation under the Obama administration, Sonal Shah shares three lessons around effective cross-sector collaboration (Gitterman et.al., 2021). Firstly, that leadership at the top matters – someone in senior leadership needs to make cross-sector collaboration a priority; secondly that collaboration requires people to come together from within and outside government to solve problems, work across agencies to make things happen and deliver results by focusing on outcomes; and finally, that it makes sense to start small, prove something can work and then replicate and / or scale it. All three lessons have relevance to the system strengthening impact of SOC, but her point around the need for an outcomes mindset backed by strong, visible leadership from the top of government feels particularly important. This is supported by a recent review of the performance of 24 public initiatives in Brazil, India and South Africa, that identified importance of full engagement by political leaders - to set a collaborative agenda and define a common vision to guide resource mobilisation – as a prerequisite for the success of both intra-governmental and cross-sector initiatives (Lazzarini et. al., 2020).

As we mentioned earlier, Khan (2017) makes a similar point around the importance of considering the emotional dynamics of behaviour change: *"while lots of thought is given to monitoring metrics to track the rational strategy, what's often overlooked is the ability to capture the human stories that will keep motivating people who are trying something new and operating in unfamiliar territory."* He argues that ongoing investment in building trust and informal relationships across government, investors, service providers and local communities is essential to create the shared values, common language and trust in each others' intentions that will drive lasting change.

Acknowledgement that any kind of substantive system change is inherently political – in the sense that there will be winners and losers – is important when considering circumstances that may influence the system strengthening impact of SOCs. To the extent that some commentators extol the potential of SOCs to increase population satisfaction by reducing corruption in public spending by increasing transparency and scrutiny (Sin, 2021), others note the resistance that may be generated to efforts to reform procurement or introduce financial management controls, as opportunities for rent-seeking and discretionary decision-making are limited (Kenyon, 2022).

> *"Moving from financing transactions to supporting program results requires us to think about the various actors in the service delivery chain – not just line ministries and service providers but the whole machinery of government behind them. We also need to consider the management systems used by those actors – for monitoring results, allocating resources, and ensuring that they are spent effectively. In other words, it means being more attentive to who needs to do what in the entire service delivery chain, and whether they have the **resources, information, and motivation** to do it." (ibid., my emphasis)*

The capacity of states to learn – defined by Jordan et. al (2013) as "*the relative pace of change in policies and the management of their implementation*" (Jordan, Turban, & Wilse-Samson, 2013)– is likely to have a significant impact on the extent to which Social Outcomes Contracts have an impact on system strengthening. The authors hypothesise that states, like China, with a greater emphasis on 'performance legitimacy' (whether or not targets are met individually and departmentally) may have a greater capacity for learning than states like India that value 'process legitimacy' (whether or not processes are adhered to and mistakes avoided).

Similarly, the nature and degree of system strengthening as a result of social outcomes contracts is also likely to be determined by broader contextual factors like how dominant vs competitive the political system is, and whether decisions are largely made through personalised deal-making or the impersonal application of rule of law (Levy, 2014). In states with dominant political leadership, there may be few constraints on political leadership and hence a strong champion for change at a senior level could enable social outcomes contracts to have a significant influence on broader policies and policy implementation approaches. Conversely, in highly personalised, politically competitive contexts leaders may be constrained and public bureaucracies weak. In such contexts, it may be most productive to think of using social outcomes contracts to drive system strengthening cumulatively through 'islands of effectiveness' by nurturing robust relationships among stakeholders who have a stake in achieving the targeted outcome.

It seems probable that to achieve sustained system strengthening through social outcomes contracts, efforts to ensure genuine government ownership and involvement in SOC design, contracting and delivery; and to both consider and work with the emotional dynamics of system change will be required.

Finally, and perhaps self-evidently, evaluations of mainstream RBF show that investment in the development of adequate technical skills is key. Financial resources and strong motivation at all levels of the system is insufficient to achieve sustained change if the people required to implement those changes lack either the authority or the relevant skills to do so (Savell et. al., 2022, in press).

7. Examples of the system strengthening impact of social outcomes contracts

These examples are intended to be illustrative of the two outcomes pathways outlined in the conceptual framework for SOC and system strengthening in Section 5. These examples are drawn from grey literature rather than academic research and are included as illustrations of the types of change SOC might catalyse rather than as evidence of their effect. The need for robust evaluation to establish causal connections between SOC and system strengthening is considered in Section 8.

Outcomes Pathway 1: Social outcomes contracts & improved policy and service design

Cameroon Kangaroo Mother Care DIB

This DIB, which ran from December 2018 to September 2021 and was commissioned by the Cameroon Ministry of Public Health and others, aimed to demonstrate and refine a scalable model of Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC) – an evidence-based approach to reducing neonatal morbidity and mortality – for the Cameroon public health system. In addition to rolling out KMC to 10 public hospitals over the course of the DIB, the programme funded a train-the-trainer model intended to embed KMC expertise within the Cameroonian health system. As the programme came to a close, the Government of Cameroon announced an intention to: embed KMC in their National Strategic Plan for Maternal and Child Health; embed KMC training into mainstream clinical training and support curricula; and create ongoing financial incentives within their mainstream PBF programme for health system strengthening with payment triggers informed by lessons from the KMC DIB. *Based on Savell & Eddleston, 2021.*

Abu Dhabi Atmah SIB

The first SIB in the Gulf region, launched in April 2020 by the Department of Community Development, is small in direct reach - at just 25 direct service recipients – but large in system strengthening ambition. The programme seeks to not only improve education and employment outcomes for programme beneficiaries, but also to: test a new curriculum for a national roll-out of services to individuals with cognitive impairments; develop standards and accreditation for professionals working with people with disabilities; educate and sustain a nationwide network of employers to employ and retain people with disabilities; and identify legislative barriers that currently restrict inclusion. *Based on Sin, 2021.*

Utah High Quality Preschool Program

In 2014, a pay for success (PFS) pilot project was launched to fund high quality preschool for low-income children in Salt Lake County over 5 years. Outcome payments for the first year of the pilot were funded by Salt Lake County and the United Way of Salt Lake. Prior to the launch of the PFS project, Utah did not appropriate any funds for preschool, nor did it have high quality

preschool standards, requirements for evaluation, data collection and outcome measurement. The implementation of the PFS pilot and the subsequent adoption by the State of Utah led the state legislature to pass the High Quality School Readiness Expansion Bill in 2016, appropriating $11 million of federal funds from the Office of Workforce Services to expand preschool access. Furthermore, the Utah School Readiness Board is now required under statute to use quality assessments and metrics to evaluate program performance. Providers are required to meet performance metrics in order to be eligible for continued funding. *Based on Dubno, 2022.*

Outcomes Pathway 2: Social outcomes contracts & improved service implementation

Colombia's first social impact bond "Empleando Futuro"

Colombia's first workforce development social impact bond, led by the Innovation Laboratory of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB Lab), the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) and the Colombian Government, was launched in 2017. Outcome payments were linked to the job placement, 3-month and 6-month retention of more than 700 internally displaced or vulnerable individuals. The use of public data and information systems in this impact bond was vital to find a cost-effective mechanism to measure outcomes and to contribute to the employment sector's evidence base (Instiglio, 2019). The government's role was critical to achieving these objectives: in addition to co-funding the outcomes with the IDB Lab, the government enabled the use of the social security contributions information system to measure formal employment and retention as outcomes (Brookings, 2020). Furthermore, this first contract influenced the government's adoption of better monitoring practices for other employment programmes in the country. After participating as outcome payor in the SIB, Prosperidad Social, one of the public authorities responsible for leading the employment interventions for vulnerable populations, started using the social security data system to track the outcomes achieved through other fee-for-service contracts. *Based on Social Finance, 2021.*

Utah Homes not Jails Program

This homelessness project targeted 315 persistently homeless individuals with high justice system involvement, through rapid rehousing services including move-in support, time-limited rental assistance, and intensive case management; and employment, substance use, and mental health services. The outcome metrics included housing stability, use of mental health and substance use services, and graduation to permanent housing. The process of collecting and reporting the outcome metrics during the SOC, made it clear that the current data system wasn't designed to enable service providers to meet service user needs in a robustly data-driven way. The lead service provider, The Road Home, led a broader homelessness services coalition to secure legislative appropriation to create and implement of an updated data system designed with community needs in mind. As a result, in 2021, the Utah Legislature established the Homeless Information Management System that will track success metrics, such as the number of service users going into substance use disorder treatment and finding jobs, among other measures, substantially increasing service provider accountability for outcomes. *Based on Dubno, 2022.*

SOCs and system strengthening in the United Kingdom

The UK was the first country to launch a social outcomes contract in the form of the Peterborough Reoffending Social Impact Bond (SIB) in 2010. This followed a public commitment by the then UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, in 2009 to pilot impact bonds as new way to fund the delivery of public services (Government Outcomes Lab). To date nearly 90 social outcomes contracts have been launched in the United Kingdom, over three times the number in any other single country (Government Outcomes Lab, 2022). As a result, the UK government has implemented a broad range of reforms to support social outcomes contracting, and impact investment more broadly, including: capitalising a social investment wholesale fund, Big Society Capital, to encourage more impact investment in 2011; expanding the eligibility criteria for Social Investment Tax Relief to include impact bond investments in 2014 (Cabinet Office, 2014); clarifying Charity Commission guidance for charitable trusts and foundations on the use of their assets for mission-related investment (CC14) in 2011 (Charities Commission, 2011); establishing a central government Centre for Social Impact Bonds in 2012 to support local government commissioners to use outcomes contracting, outcomes data and outcomes-focused governance to drive better value for public money; and seed funding a global knowledge hub for social outcomes contracting at the University of Oxford, the Government Outcomes (GO) Lab in 2016 (Cabinet Office, 2016).

8. Applying the conceptual framework to research, practice and policy

Robust evaluation is needed to establish causal connections between social outcomes contracts and system strengthening in the terms that we have applied here. Namely, the legacy effects of social outcomes contracts on policy implementation capacity that sustain beyond the term and scope of social outcomes contracts themselves.

The conceptual framework (Section 5) can be used to generate a number of research questions for further hypothesis generation and empirical study across a range of contexts. The framework may also support future integration of findings from studies testing diverse hypotheses around social outcomes contracts and system strengthening across a range of contexts.

These questions, broadly speaking, fit into three categories, namely:

1. The effects of social outcomes contracts on policy and service design;
2. The effects of social outcomes contracts on service implementation; and
3. The influence of contextual factors on the system strengthening impact of social outcomes contracts.

For the first two sets of questions, the key consideration is whether social outcomes contracts do, in fact, influence broader policy and service design and / or service implementation practices and, if so, whether that influence is positive or negative. Beyond this, it would be valuable to understand, in greater detail, the mechanisms and circumstances under which such impact is realised and whether this varies in predictable ways according to key variables. Such variables might include, but not be limited to: the involvement and roles of key stakeholders in inputs and activities (e.g. donor agencies, service providers, government, etc.); the availability and use of funding for data systems, evaluation and knowledge sharing; and the nature and composition of governance structures and feedback loops.

The third set of questions considers the potential influence, on the system strengthening impact of social outcomes contracts, of the broader contextual landscape within which SOCs are implemented. Considerations might include, but not be limited to: the extent to which political competition rewards the quality of service delivery; political and bureaucratic time horizons; and baseline levels of policy implementation capacity across government, the non-profit and private sectors.

As with any kind of systems change evaluation, the causal attribution of system-level effects to social outcomes contracts may be challenging as impacts are cumulative over time and are likely to result from the efforts of many parties. There may be an argument for using Contribution Analysis – a pragmatic approach for better understanding how a programme might have contributed to a broader systemic outcome that is well suited to complex situations – as opposed to traditional experimental designs (McKenzie & Cabaj, 2020).

While the evidence is emerging around when, where and how social outcomes contracts have system strengthening effects, the framework may nevertheless support policy makers and practitioners to be more intentional around the way they are designing, launching and implementing social outcomes contracts.

We are hopeful that it may support clarity around both the kinds of longer-term system strengthening impact that practitioners and policy makers are hoping to achieve through SOCs, and the mechanisms – including broader investments of time and resources – that might be relevant to achieve that. The framework may also support policy makers to develop and fund a learning agenda to inform the future design of social outcomes contracts and ecosystem strengthening investments.

Notes

[i] This paper uses the definition of Social Outcomes Contract applied in the GO Lab's ongoing systematic review of the effects of SOC approaches: "*We have defined SOC arrangements as the provision of any public service or social programme on behalf of a commissioner (i.e., a government outcomes payer) by non-governmental service providers where payment to providers is contingent (either in full or partly) on the achievement of pre-specified, measurable outcomes. Key components therefore include: independent, non-governmental delivery agents; contracted provision; and payment contingent on outcomes performance/results achieved. To be included, the 'unit of incentivisation' within the intervention must be appropriate. For example, payment for outcomes where the incentivised agent is a government (e.g., some forms of Results Based Financing) or an individual person or household (performance-related pay for teachers or conditional cash transfers) will be excluded. The incentivised organisation(s) must be service providers from the private or not-for-profit sectors or in the case of impact bond type models, investment managers/special purpose vehicles where returns are contingent on the achievement of specified outcomes.*" Picker, Carter, et. al. (2021)

[ii] "*Impact bonds are outcome-based contracts that incorporate the use of private funding from investors to cover the upfront capital required for a provider to set up and deliver a service. The service is set out to achieve measurable outcomes established by the commissioning authority (or outcome payer) and the investor is repaid only if these outcomes are achieved. Impact bonds encompass both social impact bonds and development impact bonds.*" *https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/knowledge-bank/glossary/#i*

[iii] It should be noted that evidence from more mainstream – non-outcomes-based - pay-for-performance programmes is both uncertain and mixed. One recent meta-review of financial arrangements for health systems in low-income countries concluded: "*the effects of provider incentives are uncertain (very low-certainty evidence), including: the effects of provider incentives on the quality of care provided by primary care physicians or outpatient referrals from primary to secondary care, incentives for recruiting and retaining health professionals to serve in remote areas, and the effects of pay-for-performance on provider performance, the utilisation of services, patient outcomes, or resource use in low-income countries.*" Wiysonge et. al. 2017.

[iv] Health is the sector in which results-based finance (RBF) has been most-widely used to date in LMICs to date, through the multi-donor Health Results Innovation Trust Fund (HRITF) which was launched in 2007. In its first 10 years, 35 performance-based finance programmes were launched in 29 countries, creating a robust sample for evaluation. https://www.rbfhealth.org/mission

[v] Cameroon Kangaroo Mother Care DIB, Colombia Workforce Development SIB, Colombia Crecemos con empleo y oportunidades SIB, South Africa Early Childhood Development Impact Fund, South Africa Bonds 4 Jobs SIB, Buenos Aires Youth Employability SIB. GO Lab INDIGO database – accessed 29.03.22

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