

Oxford University Government Outcomes Lab 2024 Social Outcomes Conference, 5 – 6 September 2024

The Social Outcomes Conference, hosted annually by the Government Outcomes Lab (GO-LAB) at the Blavatnik School of Government, took place in Oxford, United Kingdom. This conference brings together practitioners, researchers, and stakeholders with a shared interest in improving social outcomes through outcomes-based contracting mechanisms. The Office of AIDS and TB Research (OATR) at the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) has a long-standing relationship with GO-LAB, and this year marked the second consecutive invitation for OATR to share its experience implementing Social Impact Bonds (SIBs).

SIBs are a type of outcomes-based contract in which an investor provides upfront capital to an implementing partner, who then delivers the intervention. If the agreed-upon outcomes are achieved, the investor is repaid – often with a return on investment – by the outcomes funder. An intermediary typically facilitates the transaction, managing all stakeholders involved.

This year's conference theme, "Accountability, Transparency & Trust in Cross-Sector Partnerships," was particularly timely given the growing need for collaboration between the public and private sectors to address complex social and health challenges. The keynote address by Professor Tina Nabatchi from Syracuse University used the metaphor of "clocks and clouds" to illustrate that complex social problems – like "cloud problems" – require innovative, multi-sectoral approaches.

The morning featured parallel sessions on applying SIBs in education, mental health, and climate and environmental health. Afternoon discussions explored new trends in outcomes-based contracting, public procurement best practices, and rebuilding public trust through partnerships. The day concluded with the launch of a 15-year review of SIB implementation in the UK, highlighting key insights and strategies for future scaling.

On the second day, the South African delegation hosted a session on global women's health, examining how partnerships can

address critical health challenges. This session demonstrated how cross-sector collaborations and outcomes-based contracts can play a pivotal role in tackling public health issues, including those related to maternal and child health. The delegation also contributed to the poster gallery, presenting findings from the implementation of the Imagine SIB, which has already shown significant results in its first five quarters.

One common critique of SIBs is that they are often seen as "too sexy" and costly, making large-scale implementation challenging. The conference included discussions on overcoming these barriers and moving beyond pilot phases to achieve broader, scalable impact. The Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, delivered a compelling closing address, emphasizing the importance of outcomes-based partnerships in driving social change.

South Africa's participation in the conference was timely, aligning with the South African Presidency's call for collaboration with experts in innovative financing to create an enabling regulatory environment for instruments like SIBs. The early successes of the Imagine SIB strengthen the case for further developing SIBs to improve public health outcomes in South Africa. In response to the Presidency's vision, OATR is planning additional SIBs focused on addressing pressing health issues through innovative financing mechanisms.

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