



## OFF TARGETS

It is wrong to believe that by setting goals and creating 'delivery mechanisms' we can remedy society's ills, argues Fellow **Dr Gary Kitchen**

Some time ago I attended a conference at which the keynote speaker commented that the local authority "performed badly" on life expectancy. In itself this may have been intended as no more than a throwaway remark, but it struck me as revealing.

No doubt the speaker was concerned that average life expectancy in the borough was lower than the national average and felt some responsibility, as an employee of the local council working in public health, to ensure this important fact was acknowledged. But the implication appeared to be that average life expectancy in the borough was somehow a function of the activities of the local council, or perhaps by extension, the local 'strategic

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partnership'. This seems to me an enormous burden to be shouldered by agencies with limited resources and reach.

It is more than just a way of talking. Local partnerships everywhere are signing up to agreements with central government which contain a plethora of desirable targets, often expressed in precise numerical terms. For example, there are plans to "halve the under-18 conception rate by 2010" and "halt the year-on-year rise in obesity in children under 11" by the same year. The funding of local agencies appears to be linked to signing up to these targets.

Often such approaches appear to rely on exhortation – publicising problems and encouraging people to change behaviour. This is no easy task. Some time ago I interviewed a man with chronic lung disease who used oxygen from a portable machine. Yet he continued to smoke, and rolled a cigarette during our conversation.

However, it is not my intention to stray too far onto the terrain of public health or criticise local agencies. I think the real problem is philosophical rather than empirical. It is wrong to see society as a kind of Newtonian social universe in which reformers have only to pull levers for the desired 'outputs' and 'outcomes' to emerge. Where is individual human agency in this picture? As Immanuel Kant said: "Ought implies can." It only makes sense to say that someone ought to do something if it is within their power to do so.

Human behaviour is based upon the premise of freedom not only to do what is in one's own long-term interests but also sometimes to undermine those interests and seek instead short-term gratification. It is obvious that a smoker who eats a fatty diet and drinks too much alcohol will have a higher risk of contracting a wide range of ailments which tend to lessen the span of life. It is equally obvious that little can be done, short of unacceptable coercion, to change that person's behaviour

unless they themselves sign up to this. In a free society we are unlikely to be able to change human behaviour by following simple law-like rules of the kind needed to make quantitative predictions meaningful. In fact it is not clear that there are causal laws determining, for example, average life expectancy. Perhaps we need to give up the idea that there are 'delivery mechanisms' to achieve such outcomes. Maybe society isn't like that.

Of course we can't just do nothing either, and effective action depends upon an accurate understanding of people and communities. We need to deepen this understanding. We can learn a lot from the voluntary and community sector, which has frontline knowledge about how society works. This is one reason why I recently founded the *Journal of Voluntary Sector Research*, which will publish the best research by, and for, this sector.

Society is not a machine but a congeries of forces in which human freedom thankfully plays an important role. In a democracy, human beings are subjected to no constraints other than the rule of law, and inevitably the impact of the state is limited. Let us acknowledge that people do not always do as they ought and human behaviour remains messy and complicated. Let our goals be empowering rather than mechanistic, broad rather than narrow, challenging but realistic, so that the chances of success are improved.

*Dr Gary Kitchen is director of Get Heard Consultancy and editor of the Journal of Voluntary Sector Research ([www.voluntarysectorresearch.com](http://www.voluntarysectorresearch.com))*

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