

## The voluntary and faith sector: 'stepping up' or 'waving but drowning' in the era of austerity?

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### Introduction

Voluntary, community and faith sector organisations have long been part of the welfare mix. They are relied upon by many citizens, both as providers of formal publicly funded services as well as through the many and varied informal channels of meeting different needs. Yet this role is often overlooked and poorly understood. Despite the Coalition's Big Society and Localism agendas, which together seemed to promise a supportive policy context for civil society, more recent indications suggest that a 'perfect storm' of welfare reforms, growing and increasingly complex needs, and the marginalisation of the most vulnerable could be overwhelming many of these systems.

Certainly, in broad terms the environment for the voluntary sector has become less favourable since the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures. Government funding has fallen from a peak of £15bn in 2010-11, to £13.7bn in 2011-12. The sector's overall income has also fallen in this period and yet spending has been maintained, suggesting that voluntary organisations have been drawing on reserves and other resources to maintain activity. There is of course a question mark over how long this can be sustained.

Thus the indications are that the sector acts as important buffer in meeting welfare needs; but many of the organisations that comprise it do so with a strong sense of their independence, moral purpose and the need to speak truth to power. These characteristics perhaps explain growing strains behind the façade of the Big Society, as voluntary organisations increasingly speak about the impact of austerity on the most vulnerable citizens and communities. In response, government ministers have betrayed frustration with the sector, telling it to keep out of politics

and 'stick to its knitting', motivations which partly underpin the introduction of the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 (the 'Lobbying Act'). For the Conservatives in particular, 'social action' in the voluntary, community and faith sector tends to be seen more as independent service to the community rather than campaigning for broader social change.

This can be seen as part of a wider project to refashion the relationship between the state and the voluntary, community and faith sector. If New Labour attempted to invest in a deeper complementary 'partnership' with the sector, a partial 'de-coupling' between the state and the sector may now be underway. There is less overall direct public investment in the sector, Labour's dedicated strategic voice and capacity building programmes have been decommissioned, and there has been an intensified rhetorical commitment to an 'independent' and 'enterprising' voluntary sector, freed from the claimed bureaucracy of the state.

This approach has developed incrementally, and involves some continuity with the previous government. It does not mean the end of public financial support for the voluntary sector; rather, it has involved a tighter focus on promoting several key agendas – social investment and 'investment readiness', closer links with the private sector, and targeted support for social action in particular fields such as youth services and mentoring in criminal justice. A watchword for the Coalition's approach here has been 'transition': the availability of temporary financial and in-kind support in order to reconfigure specific fields of voluntary action, such as advice services and local voluntary sector infrastructure. The aim is to promote the sustainability of organisations by becoming more enterprising and com-

petitive. As a result they would be expected to make less of a demand on public funding, other than through winning contracts or sub-contracts to deliver core public services.

### **A shock absorber in a time of need**

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It is difficult to point to robust evidence about increased need and the extent to which the sector is responding, and it is of course partly for this reason that claims about growing need and fractures in society have been so contested. Indeed, it is a reflection of stretched resources that evidence about impacts *is* so piecemeal. In the last two years there have been reports of local advice and mental health services being overwhelmed by growing demands from individuals facing the consequences of the wide-ranging welfare reforms, cuts, and the heavy-handed use of sanctions (Forrest, 2012; see Butler, various dates). In the course of our own research into the provision of community mental health services in Birmingham a number of respondents made clear that they felt many people with severe needs were falling through gaps in services, exacerbated by cutbacks and the closure of some organisations; and the failure to address needs at an early stage meant that individuals presented to accident and emergency and other acute services with much more severe (and expensive to treat) needs (Rees et al., 2014).

Research conducted by the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) during 2013 explored the influence that voluntary organisations sought to exert on public policy. Notably, participants in focus groups conducted at a local level drew attention to the fact that welfare reform was significantly increasing demand for organisations' services (such as benefits and debt advice), at the same time as resources from local government were being reduced. This meant that whilst they were very aware of the policy and political factors contributing to the needs that their clients had, resources were absorbed in responding to these at the front line, leaving little scope for campaigning on the underlying causes (Buckingham et al., 2014). This scenario, of course, does not seem out of keeping with the sentiment of the Lobbying Act, and raises significant concerns in terms of social justice and the development

of well-informed long-term solutions to social problems.

One area where 'voice' of increasing volume and political purchase has emerged though is in relation to food poverty. The proliferation of food banks across the country has sparked vigorous debate about what is driving demand for emergency food aid. Food banks have been criticised on the one hand for generating demand by their very existence, and on the other for allowing the government to evade responsibility for welfare provision. The recent All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into hunger, however, attributed their growth primarily to 'low pay, growing inequality, a harsh benefits sanctions regime and social breakdown' (Wintour and Butler, 2014). The inquiry also found that volunteers tended to see their participation in providing these services as an uncomfortable necessity, not as a long-term solution. Whatever the exact combination of drivers of food bank usage – and DWP officials and ministers have vigorously refuted the voices from the Church of England and civil society – it is difficult to escape the report's claim that they have become 'the new shock absorbers of society'.

The UK's food banks have two particularly interesting characteristics: firstly, many of those involved in providing them are people with a faith commitment and many have been set up by local churches, and secondly – unlike many voluntary sector interventions during the New Labour years – they tend to be voluntarily resourced and independent of government funding. Whilst these characteristics might in one sense make them ideal 'servants' of Cameron's 'Big Society' rhetoric, they also – and perhaps contradictorily – have a certain resilience and a degree of autonomy, as well as alternative sources of authority, wisdom, resources and morality. This is certainly evident in the contributions that Archbishop Justin Welby has made to public debate on the issues of food poverty and pay-day lending, for example. But the voluntary nature of these services and their connectedness to faith communities also have implications 'on the ground' in local communities.

Recent research on faith-based social engagement in Birmingham and nationally explored the involvement of different faiths and denominations in meeting social needs in their local communities. In deprived communities, churches, faith groups and sometimes other grassroots organisations were frequently seeking to provide for communities' social needs, after public and other voluntary sector organisations had withdrawn due to lack of funding or other challenges. The ability to draw on voluntary resources – and a theologically motivated commitment to loving and serving others – were central to the work that many of these groups were engaged in. However, expertise and financial resources did place limits on what could be achieved, and faith communities were not always well supplied with volunteers.

Another important theme that emerged from the Birmingham-based research was the significance of 'encounter' in the context of faith-based social engagement. Welby (2014) alludes to how important this can be for food bank clients, explaining that 'the gift of food, delivered with compassion and a listening ear, can begin a remarkable process'. However, the way in which such initiatives bring together people with different backgrounds and life experience but a common humanity can also be transformative for volunteers. As one respondent put it: 'if you bring individuals into an encounter, then actually that changes you as much as the person'. This raises a question of whether a key 'political' role for the voluntary sector is to broker encounters – whether actual, or via the media – between individuals of diverse backgrounds and experience in an increasingly atomized and individualized society, in the hope that such experiences will shape, in a constructive way, their own engagement in the social, political and economic spheres within which they have influence.

## Conclusion

It seems difficult, if not impossible, to get a clear grasp of the manifold impacts of retrenchment of public spending, reductions in local government capacity, the withdrawal of welfare entitlements, and growing and new forms of need. Nevertheless there are clear indications of growing

stresses, fractures and inequalities within society – as voices from civil society testify (O'Hara, 2014). At the same time it also seems impossible to accurately gauge how the voluntary and faith sector is responding, other than to say that it is, as best it can and perhaps imperfectly, acting as an important 'shock absorber' within society. In many ways then this demonstrates a paradox at the heart of the idea of civil society stepping in where the state has withdrawn – and this is particularly well illustrated by the phenomenon of food banks: the necessity for them, and their very existence, is a shocking indictment, but they also offer spaces of hope and encounter within a colder cultural, political and financial environment. What remains to be seen, then, is whether the 'warmth' of such encounters will radiate outwards, bringing sustainable change at a more structural and strategic level, or whether we will continue to rely heavily on fragile, local and voluntary resources to support the most disadvantaged in our society.

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