Critical issues for voluntary action

Despite growing political emphasis on the role of the voluntary sector, and increased attention from researchers, there is little systematic sense of the complex and contradictory realities of voluntary action. A report by Manchester, Sheffield Hallam and Birmingham Universities illustrates the dynamic and contingent nature of voluntary action, through case studies of the events and relationships which shaped eight organisations at critical points in their development. These case studies are framed by key themes relevant to the wider voluntary sector. The study found:

f **A constant issue for voluntary organisations is managing the tensions between: internal values or aims and the external policy environment; the divergent and changing expectations of internal and external stakeholders; and financial opportunities and constraints. A balance between these tensions might never be completely and permanently achieved, particularly within the context of changing political agendas and unpredictable events such the implementation of health action zones or the resignation of key staff.**

f **Even if an organisation has the capacity to respond to statutory initiatives and to absorb additional work, that development may compromise values. New statutory priorities and tight deadlines often involve voluntary organisations in precipitous change with little time for reflection. There is a temptation to respond opportunistically to new funding programmes.**

f **Strategic planning is important in this environment in ensuring that pragmatism does not replace purpose. To be effective, however, strategic planning needs to reflect the constraints and turbulence within which the individual organisation operates, defining attainable objectives which are then explicitly reviewed, renewed or revised.**

f **People are at the heart of the voluntary sector. Organisational objectives and outcomes are negotiated through internal and external relationships, and through formal and informal networks. Individuals' capacities, needs and aspirations have a significant impact on organisational dynamics and need to be acknowledged in the training, management and support of both paid workers and volunteers.**

f **Growth and change place new demands on physical infrastructure, on management systems and the entrepreneurial skills of key workers. The researchers conclude that the sector needs to continue to develop these aspects but that this should not be at the expense of informal inputs and processes, the inter-dependence of voluntary agencies in local communities and the skills often contributed by those without more formal qualifications.**

Case study research: a thematic approach

The study explored some of the issues which influence organisational agencies in the voluntary sector. The research adopted a case study approach, which can explore processes and reveal difference, complexity and contradiction in ways which frequently escape quantitative methods. Case study research also attempts to go beyond the detailed description found in the 'case history'; it is explicitly concerned with analytical themes from the outset.

The study focused on the following eight themes, one in each of the sample agencies. Through lengthy interviews, particular incidents were identified which could provide insight into the wider implications for policy and practice.

Infrastructure

An under-resourced physical infrastructure and inadequate training budgets or management and administrative systems have implications for service delivery and for organisational sustainability.

> "Until a month ago I did not have a proper desk. I had an old kitchen table and to stop the money going all over the place - it would either go down the crack or stick to the surface - I had to put a plank across the table." (Administrator)

However, being embedded in formal and informal community networks can compensate for such under-resourcing in small voluntary agencies.

> "We only use one per cent of the computer's capacity - we simply don't know what it can do. There is a course at the college but what we want is specific training here for what we need. The college have agreed to do it, but it would cost £35 an hour. The Chair put it to Age Concern England who have a scheme to help small organisations - 'Getting Fit for Funding' with a budget, for training. Otherwise we'd not be able to pursue it."

Values and identity

Issues of why people take up voluntary activity and continue or cease to do so are central to the sector's vitality. The second case study demonstrated that the factors which prompt initial volunteering and continuing involvement are less rational than surveys might suggest:

> "'I think people sometimes don't like to refuse. They've every right to. We wouldn't think any worse of them for it. But I think they feel as though they're in a can't win situation."

The case study illustrates particularly how individuals' values and identities influence their decisions and how altruism and a sense of duty are rooted in personal history, interpersonal relations and the implicit agreements which exist between volunteers and their colleagues.

> "I was very ill as a child. Nobody thought I'd live to be 21, let alone get married and have three 6ft sons. Now I suppose really I'm so grateful that I've got where I am, I try to pay it back."

> "You realise that if you don't do it, you're letting people down. You probably go to bed at night thinking 'Right that's it, I'm packing it in'. But next morning you think 'Oh, I feel a bit better' and you go on."

When personal aspirations or circumstances change and volunteers no longer wish to continue, they can face a range of pressures from subtle encouragement to emotional blackmail. The exit process can therefore involve difficult negotiations.

> "They wanted a chairman you see. And it went deathly quiet and I thought 'Oh no, I can't stand this'. But it's just a figurehead isn't it? So I waited and then eventually I said 'Yes' and that was it. Now I've got it, I can't get rid of it. Nobody else wants it!"

Social entrepreneurs

The 'social entrepreneur' is a catalyst pulling together partners and resources to develop innovative solutions to social problems. The role demands flair, creativity and energy, but unrealistic expectations can lead to failure and burn-out.

> "I was getting here earlier and earlier and I was taking work home at night … I wasn't sleeping. I kept waking up in the night thinking I must do this and this and this. It was beginning to make me unwell." (Project Manager)

Individual capacity is constrained by the range and number of demands made and by the management and administrative support available.

> "So I said to the committee 'Unless I get some help we're going to go under. You've got to do this, otherwise I'm going to go.' "

Stakeholders and accountability

Service users, funders, paid workers, trustees and other volunteers exert different degrees of influence and control at strategic and operational levels. Furthermore, boundaries of influence shift in response to changes either in agency constraints and priorities or in wider policy and financial environments. This case study illustrated the difficulties involved in reconciling divergent interests which eventually undermined accountability to service users (here when this project which had been previously funded through charitable income became dependent on a statutory contract).

"I had to go into meetings with users, knowing I had been gagged [about proposed changes in service delivery]. This would have been unimaginable in the past - in a project driven by users. I felt social services wanted us to be accountable to them - and no longer to see users as the constituency to which we were accountable." (Project Manager)

Management

Management structures and processes evolve in response to organisational change and growth. The voluntary sector is also increasingly adopting managerial techniques from the public and private sectors. This case study illustrated the positive and negative ways in which this style of management is perceived within an organisation.

"… one of the most painful things was getting service managers in the field to write business plans. They have been dragged kicking and screaming, but they don't grumble now because by doing these plans, they guarantee their own resources." (Chief Executive)

New approaches and structures can improve practice and cost-effectiveness; but they can also undermine individual commitment and organisational flexibility.

"… two of my social workers had been having problems in relation to a client. They tracked me down at a managers' 'away day' and saw the plush surroundings and the wonderful lunch that had been laid on for us. Being angry and frustrated already, they were very stroppy . .... There is now a real tension in the organisation. Whereas we all used to be working towards the same end, now some are working to diktats from the Finance and Admin Committee, and others are working for service users." (Service Manager)

Strategic planning

When voluntary organisations adopt the principle of strategic planning, their practice reveals a number of inherent problems. Trustees and workers can be suspicious and sceptical of a formalised approach to their everyday concerns; the structures and systems necessary to develop, implement and review strategic plans may not exist in smaller agencies; and progress is undermined by organisational change. This case study illustrated how these inhibit attempts to replace 'organisational drift' with 'organisational drive'.

Colin suggests that perhaps the Committee should have an away day to think more strategically about what the organisation is and what its purpose is and then to develop some plan of action for the next few years. Joan quickly responds:

"An away day? But we've had one of those just last year, just before you became Chair." She pulls out some typed notes and gives them to Colin. He's not over-impressed. While there may have been an away day, and there may be some notes, this doesn't amount to a strategic plan.

Networking

Networks are significant both at the level of service delivery, in accessing information and resources, and influencing policy development locally and nationally.

"We sit there because we want to be sure that our client group is represented … Sometimes I feel I could be doing much more productive work. But if you're not there, you don't find out what's happening."

Networks may be informal or formal, and involve both inter-organisational and inter-personal relationships, even friendships. Extensive networks and intensive relationships each require investment by the voluntary organisation in their development. They also demand personal skills and confidence.

"I could leave tomorrow, and I could leave a new worker a list of contacts. But it would take her six months to make her own networks. It very much depends on the nature of the person and what you bring. … You bring so much of a network with you, from your previous experience, and then you develop it further."

External agendas

Voluntary agencies regularly wrestle with a changing political agenda. Even if an organisation has the capacity to respond to new statutory initiatives and to absorb additional work, that development may involve a distortion of mission or compromise values.

"... This organisation has refused money in the past - which some people feel is very bold. But why? Even if the funding represents a clear gain, unless you gain something you want, why have it?"

In practice, new statutory priorities and tight deadlines often involve voluntary organisations in precipitous change with little time for reflection, let alone negotiation. There is a temptation to respond opportunistically to new funding programmes:

"A new, funding programme has just appeared out of the blue. It's £7 million, a three-year programme ... but the applications have got to be returned within three weeks! It's madness. In my opinion it would be better for the whole voluntary sector to turn round and say: 'This is totally unrealistic, we don't want any of it.' … But you won't get that -you'll get people rushing to fill in forms and create projects."

This case study also highlighted the unequal nature of voluntary-statutory partnerships hastily assembled to implement new government initiatives and the continuing importance of less formalised relationships between the sectors, despite the contract culture and the recent development of 'compacts'.

Lessons for practice

Among their conclusions, the researchers highlight the following implications for policy and practice:

Infrastructure: Those with a 'traditional' view of voluntarism should accept spending on infrastructure and training as legitimate costs. It would be a mistake, however, to allow enhanced investment to undermine existing ways of coping and subtle local reciprocities.

Values and identity: In recruiting and sustaining volunteers it is important to match their skills, constraints and aspirations with the activities and responsibilities involved and to periodically review changing personal and social contexts. This is particularly crucial for 'key' volunteers and for difficult positions to fill, such as the chairperson or treasurer.

Social entrepreneurs: Funders and management committees need to recognise not only the value of developing the social entrepreneur but also the organisational constraints which put pressure on their role and the personal consequences of these. There is potential for inter-organisational learning, peer support and mentoring here.

Stakeholders and accountability: Voluntary organisations should map out the legitimate spheres of influence of different stakeholders, understand that these may change, and ensure that mechanisms for developing policy and practice remain all-inclusive and empowering.

Management: The challenge for agencies with an increasing role in service delivery, whose operational structures and needs have become more complex and which are increasingly caught up in external audit, inspection and evaluation regimes, is to evolve a management culture which also allows for organisational flexibility, responsiveness and mutuality.

Strategic planning: Strategic planning needs to take account of organisational context. It should also allow for unpredictability rather than assuming a formal framework will suffice. Planning for aims which are attainable will provide focus and develop confidence.

Networking: Networking is neither a marginal nor clandestine activity and should be explicitly recognised in annual monitoring and reporting; in training and support; in systems of individual, group and agency accountability; and in strategic planning, project design and funding applications.

External agendas: There is a need to develop closer relationships between the sectors, to genuinely include voluntary agencies in policy and programme development and to understand the role of less formalised relationships in that process. However, voluntary organisations should be able to resist, and negotiate modifications to, new opportunities where these undermine their ethos or existing activities. Strategic planning and diversified funding will be important.

About the study

The study drew upon previous research involving 40 voluntary organisations across England. The eight chosen here represent different sizes, structures and activities. Further interviews and observations were undertaken over a three-month period. The researchers aimed to produce qualitative material which moved beyond description into a more interpretative issue-based approach, which would expose tensions and contradictions. A commitment was therefore given that there would be careful consultation about the final report, but a long-established shared relationship with the sample agencies was clearly valuable. The 'closeness' of this relationship, however, also presented methodological problems and challenges which are discussed in the report.

The research has not covered all perspectives; the narratives and views expressed reflect the particular locations of interviewees within organisations; and the stories are still evolving. Nevertheless it is clear that case studies can open up discussion about key themes central to the dynamics and sustainability of voluntary action, including the contradictions and puzzles usually tidied away.

How to get further information

The full report, **Moving pictures: Realities of voluntary action** by Duncan Scott, Pete Alcock, Lynne Russell and Rob Macmillan, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 233 0, price £13.95).