Continuity and change in an era of instability: developing a shared agenda for voluntary action research and practice

Workshop Report

February 2019

Introduction

On the 14 February 2019, TSRC worked in partnership with BVSC to host a one day workshop, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), on continuity and change in voluntary action. The workshop brought together approximately 100 academics, policy makers, practitioners and funding bodies to share learning and thinking around major trends and developments affecting voluntary action. It explored these issues at the national and local level, across the voluntary sector as a whole and within specific fields of activity.

The day was informed by presentations of cross-cutting findings distilled from the past ten years of TSRC's extensive research portfolio and key insights from national and regional representatives, with participants critically reflecting on these themes in light of their own experiences. Discussion-based sessions drew on this collective expertise to explore how existing research evidence could help navigate current challenges and identify the research needs of the future. The aim was to provide an opportunity to take stock, to reflect, and to shape a new research agenda for voluntary sector research and practice. In this brief report we focus on the key messages of the day. The slides associated with each of the following presentations and workshops will soon be available on our [website](#).

Where is the voluntary sector and how can research help it get better?

After thoughtful introductions to the workshop by our chair and host, Brian Carr of BVSC, and by John Mohan of the TSRC, the day got underway with a keynote speech by Dan Corry of New Philanthropy Capital. Dan highlighted the challenging context within which the third sector is currently operating – deep local authority funding cuts, which are hitting poorer areas harder, the introduction of universal credit, stagnant pay, increased regulation and a series of 'scandals' to name but a few of the developments. He also noted how concerns about public sector cuts have led some commentators to position the voluntary sector in opposition to the state and denigrate what volunteers and charitable provision have to offer society. Dan went on to discuss the important insights which existing and recent research on the third sector has provided, including evidencing the low numbers of charities measuring impact and the dominance of funder requirement as the key driver amongst those who do. One set of findings that particularly stuck out came from the CIPD Working Lives Report, within which respondents suggested that the voluntary sector was particularly poor at being open to employee voice. Opportunities for career advancement were also highlighted as an area of concern. Dan finished his presentation by challenging the audience to really think about what third sector organisations themselves wanted from research – questions about impact were at the top of the agenda – and how academics can ensure their research is more relevant. He shared an example from the ['What Works Centre for Wellbeing'](#) to highlight how diverse organisations can bring together evidence to support and influence decision-making.

Navigating continuity and change: what have we learned?

Next we were offered four 'lightning' overviews of different aspects of continuity and change in voluntary action that served to stimulate debate amongst participants. Rob Macmillan of Sheffield Hallam University focused on changes in **third sector policy and infrastructure**, arguing that the past ten years had witnessed a 'de-coupling' of the partnership between voluntary sector and the state which had characterised the New Labour era. The 'unsettlement' that characterised the recent third sector context had put it 'on the defensive'. Rob finished his talk with some 'reasons to be optimistic', highlighting several developments including the recently published *Civil Society Strategy* as indicators that a more positive approach to the third sector might be on the horizon.

John Mohan (TSRC) followed with insights on long term continuity and change gleaned from large scale quantitative datasets. These showed somewhat surprising levels of stability at the **sector level** – levels of income have gone up (partly because of new organisations transferring into the charitable field) as has staffing, though volunteering rates have remained stable. Indicators about the effects of recession and austerity show a clear downturn from 2008 onwards, but with signs of recovery in more recent years. The data, however, also highlighted the importance of **disaggregating patterns** across what is a very diverse sector. One particularly notable feature is the persistence of geographical inequality in the distribution of organisations. The distribution of charities today is very closely correlated to the distribution of charities in the early 1970s.

Shifting the focus from what we can count to what we experience, Angela Ellis Paine (TSRC) talked about how continuity and change is felt, thought and talked about within **third sector organisations**. Angela highlighted the turbulence that can be hidden underneath any apparent stability in resources – the amount of work and effort required to maintain income levels, the considerable churn of projects and staff, shifts in the role and position of organisations, what services are provided, how they are provided and to whom. Qualitative research with organisations has highlighted both the turbulent context within which they operated and the different strategies and tactics they had adopted in attempts to run (as one person put it) a 'steady ship in very, very choppy waters'.

James Rees, from the Open University, finished the set of lightning talks with a focus on **leadership** within the third sector. James identified a growing concern about a 'leadership deficit' within the third sector but questioned how this conclusion had been reached and whether or not there was a shared understanding of what leadership meant and what 'good leadership' within the voluntary sector might look like. While recognising that much could be done to strengthen leadership, he cautioned against viewing leadership development as a 'magic bullet' for the third sector.

The round table discussions which followed on from the presentations drew out key points that participants had taken from the talks and how these interacted with their own experiences.

Delving deeper: Sharing knowledge of current issues

A series of workshops, each introduced by a mix of academics and practitioners, focusing on different topics of concern to third sector organisations, and each asking what insights can be gleaned from research and what implications that might suggest for policy and practice.

Focusing on **advocacy and campaigning**, Elizabeth Cookingham Bailey and Phil Child (both TSRC) led a workshop which explored the different strategies adopted by third sector organisations for contributing to the democratic process and the mechanisms used to exert influence. Drawing on insights from historical research with a selection of case study organisations, they explored how advocacy and campaigning within third sector organisations has changed over the last 30 years, including considering how funding affects the capacity for advocacy, how engagement in public service delivery can impact on the ability to campaign, and what successful advocacy and campaigning strategies look like.

Angela Ellis Paine (TSRC) and Ruth Leonard (Macmillan Cancer Support & Association of Volunteer Managers) reflected on the current expectations placed on **volunteering** – by policy rhetoric, organisations and individuals – and what research and practice suggested about its ability to live up to these expectations. The discussions focused on both the stability in overall levels of volunteering, and the changes in the motivations for and experiences of volunteering and what this might mean for organisational approaches to volunteer management / leadership and its contribution to society.

Paul Montgomery (TSRC) and Martin Gallagher (Clare Foundation) focused on the 'how and why' of **impact evaluation**. The session offered reflections from both research and practice based evidence on the rationale for, challenges working against, and possible approaches to evidence production in third sector organisations.

With a focus on the erosion of public spaces for participation, Angus McCabe (TSRC) and Mandy Wilson (Independent Practitioner) facilitated a discussion on whether / how communities can make **place-based change** happen. The session discussed the renewed policy interest in 'bottom up', hyper-local, community led change initiatives, such as Big Local and the Community Organisers programmes, and questioned what such 'bottom up' change programmes can achieve in austere times. The session considered both what hyper local change looks like, and what the future hold for resident led action.

The final workshop, led by Laura Kelly (TSRC), James Rees (OU) and Rebecca Ince (OU) explored the **changing relationship between the voluntary sector and the public sector**, including through the increased involvement of voluntary organisations in public service delivery. The workshop explored the political and financial relationships that connect voluntary and public sector organisations, reflecting on what 'good' partnerships with the statutory sector look like and what can help or hinder that.

Reflections and lessons learned: Experiencing continuity and change

A panel of four practitioners, each drawn from different parts of the voluntary and public sector, offered their reflections on the key points to have emerged from the day and how they related to their own experiences of continuity and change in voluntary action.

Karl Wilding, from NCVO, pointed out that we often know more than we think we do, but are not always good at getting research out in a format which is useable by voluntary organisations. He noted a tendency to view change as negative and through a lens and with language that is outdated. There is a need to recognise the agency that voluntary organisation have in shaping change, but also to acknowledge and address issues of diversity and inclusion.

Dipali Chandra, of West Midlands Funders Network, highlighted the changing role of funders. Through the rise of approaches such as 'grants plus' she recognised that funders were in some cases filling the gap left by the decline in voluntary sector infrastructure and capacity building. She noted that the independent trust sector is not homogenous, which means universal processes are not possible, but principles relating to assessment processes and associated demands can be framed. Grant makers can also play an important role through sharing data, and in doing so through distributing knowledge and power, but – she argued – some independent funders could do more to engage with research.

Heather Buckingham of the Church Urban Fund highlighted the ways in which faith based organisations were working with others to help solve challenging problems. She identified three key things which help when it comes to seeking mutuality in joint working relationships: 1. Knowledge – both conceptual and practical (of which the voluntary sector has lots), and the need to equip leaders at the grass-roots; 2. Confidence – being aware of what we bring to the table; 3. Knowing who we are – ensuring all our work and partnerships are underpinned by our values. She noted that organisations cannot always control the context in which they operate, but they can control their conduct.

Austin Rodriguez, from Birmingham City Council, provided a valuable insight into the changing commissioning landscape. He highlighted a growing interest in prevention, the important role that voluntary action can play in this, and some of the implications of that agenda for commissioning practices. He argued that the prevention agenda encourages a radical rethinking of commissioning, since agencies must look beyond narrow agendas to focus on shared conditions for human flourishing. Creating the conditions for prevention requires the public sector to engage with inequality, complexity and diversity, but also to work with others. Austin finished by posing a series of questions including: What do 'good' organisations look like? What are realistic, proportionate and measurable outcomes (and impacts)? What does a supportive, collaborative relationship and partnership look like between public sector and voluntary sector? And, how can we create investment opportunities with and trust in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors?

Participants were then asked to reflect on the learning from the day and identify future priorities for action. Posed with three questions, the groups highlighted several key themes which can be summarised as follows:

1. **What were the main messages from the day?**
   a. Importance of coproduction – there is good evidence and research out there, but it is not always very accessible or well utilised. Academics and practitioners need to work more closely together to co-produce research and share learning.
   b. The neglect of inequalities and diversity: there is a need for more work on the the impact of diversity (or lack of it) on the sector, on valuing difference within the sector, and on how the sector is working to overcome inequalities.
   c. The need to realise community power – the importance of unleashing the power of communities to 'get things done', but the need to support and enable action at the local level.
   d. The potential and limits of volunteering – volunteering can provide many positive outcomes but levels of volunteering are static, and access to volunteering is not even. We need to recognise how volunteering is changing.
   e. How to get the most from cross-sector collaboration – awareness of changing relationships between third sector, public sector, private sector and funders, and the potential to embrace opportunities for collaboration while ensuring that the independence and core mission of an organisation is protected.
   f. Need to recognise agency – while third sector organisations might not be able to control the context, they can control their conduct and can do things to improve their situation.

2. **What are the priorities for practice?**
   a. Ensure practice learns from/is challenged by research, and vice versa, including through practitioners working with academics to develop research questions
   b. Ensuring practitioners understand the importance of and challenges to diversity and that this is reflected in their practice and research endeavours.
   c. Learning from research insights and developing workforce – including leadership and management but also all workers – what makes a 'good' voluntary sector workers?
   d. Ensure that processes for evaluation are built in from the start of programmes, that they are co-produced, include a range of tools to assess both 'soft' and 'hard' outcomes, and that the learning is fed back to all stakeholders

3. **What are the priorities for research?**
   a. Co-designing and co-producing research and evaluation to enhance quality and impact.
   b. Addressing questions relevant to the sector, including, for example: changing relationships between third sector organisations and their various stakeholders; what works in helping address challenges for deprived communities; changes in funding landscape; changes to volunteering and volunteer management; understanding what interventions work and why, including workers' skills.
   c. Employing varied and mixed research methods, appropriate to the different questions being explored and the different contexts.

d. Varied and engaged dissemination, tailored to different audiences to increase the accessibility of research findings.

What next?

The workshop concluded with thoughts from John Mohan and Brian Carr on both the value of the day (since confirmed by evaluation responses!) and next steps. John reflected on TSRC's role in taking the agenda forward, reconfirming our commitment to working with a broad range of academics, practitioners and policy makers to undertake research which is robust, independent from, informed by, and relevant to third sector organisations.

We have already begun to take some things forward:

1. Seminar: Collaborative commissioning: Insights from local work 19 March 2019, London – to find out more, and register, please see: https://www.eventbrite.com/e/tsrc-seminar-collaborative-commissioning-insights-from-local-work-tickets-56043535724

2. Webinar: Picking up on the theme of leadership, we are working with the Centre for Voluntary Sector Leadership at the Open University to host a webinar on collaborative leadership. Details will be announced shortly.

3. Publication: In an attempt to distil key findings from across TSRC's broad programme of work, a new publication will be launched in the coming months. Written in an engaging and accessible way, it captures some of TSRC's main findings and key achievements, while also signposting readers to more detailed individual articles and reports should they want to find out more.

4. Co-producing research: Several conversations have been developing about how we take can forward the strong push to emerge from the workshop for more co-produced research. One example of this is around the topic of family volunteering, which we are pursuing with a number of voluntary organisations who have expressed an interest in this area.

5. Diversity and inclusion: We recently contributed to a VSSN seminar on race, culture and migrants, with a presentation by Liz Bailey on community organisation by Black women's groups and will continue to investigate opportunities to research and write about these issues.

You can find out more on our website, on Twitter (@3rdSectorRC) or by signing up to our newsletter (email S.Lawrence.2@bham.ac.uk to add your name to the distribution list).

We look forward to continuing the conversation with you.