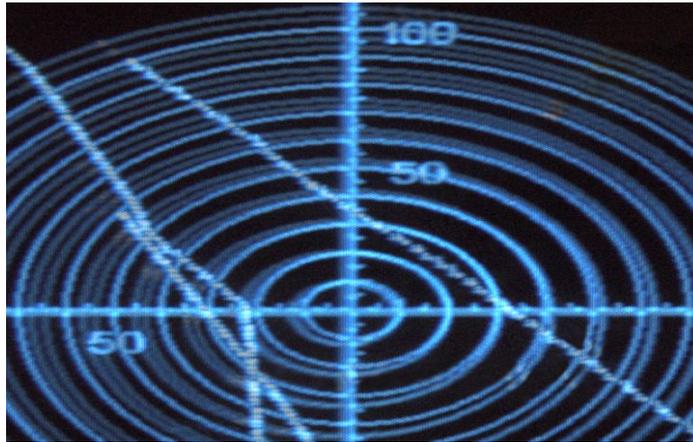


## Third Sector Research Centre



Sixth Below the Radar Reference Group and Mini-Conference

### **Key Notes**

Third Sector Research Centre

16<sup>th</sup> September 2014

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## Welcome and Introductions

**Professor John Mohan**, Director of the Third Sector Research Centre, welcomed participants to this, the sixth, 'below the radar' reference group and mini-conference. He reminded people that these events were not only important in terms of critical feedback on emerging 'below the radar' findings but have also contributed to shaping the research agenda in terms of both community groups and the more formal voluntary sector.

John then went on to thank Barrow Cadbury Trust for their continued support on the Centre and to up-date on developments at TSRC. He noted that, whilst the Centre had been shortlisted for the Economic and Social Research Council's Centre's and Large Grants funding round on civil society, this proposal had been unsuccessful – despite very positive feedback. This affected the capacity of TSRC in terms of the range of research activities it could undertake. However, there was a strong University of Birmingham commitment to the Centre's work with voluntary and community organisations and that core funding had been guaranteed for the next two years.

In addition to this support, TSRC would be seeking other Research Council funds – and monies for other independent research and evaluation activities, to continue the Centre's work and focus on developing understanding of, and within, civil society organisations.

**Debbie Pippard**, Barrow Cadbury Trust, commented on the role 'below the radar' research had in developing the understanding of small community groups. She noted that much of the research into the sector was on larger, formalised, voluntary organisations. This was important, but missed the wider contribution of small community groups and activities to neighbourhoods and wider civil society. Debbie used an analogy from scuba diving. In this field of study, most of the attention had been paid to studying large sea creatures (the formal voluntary sector). Yet it was the small fish and plankton (community groups) that were crucial to the health of coral reefs (civil, and civilised, communities).

She welcomed the focus on the role these groups play in combating the impact of austerity on vulnerable groups and on their contribution to equalities agendas. Finally, Debbie noted that she was looking forward to the presentations on emerging 'below the radar' research findings, participant feedback on these findings, and the discussions on future TSRC and 'below the radar' research priorities.



## Small groups and the emerging market for infrastructure support

**Rob Macmillan**

Third Sector Research Centre  
University of Birmingham

*'Keeping on below the radar'*  
Reference group and mini-conference  
Birmingham, 16th Sept '14

The field of capacity building and infrastructure in the voluntary and community sector is going through significant change, in terms of the resources available, but also in its language, models of work and starting assumptions. Much, it seems, is up for grabs.

There seems to be growing interest in 'demand-led' capacity building and support, which aims to shift the balance of provision so that it more explicitly focuses on the needs of frontline organisations. In this presentation Rob Macmillan discussed the findings of two recent pieces of research charting this unsettled field: firstly an exploratory study of three voucher-based capacity building initiatives (Walton and Macmillan, 2014), and secondly, a scoping study of the evidence base around 'building capabilities' for the Big Lottery Fund (Macmillan et al, 2014). The discussion focused on how smaller voluntary organisations and community groups might fare in a 'demand-led' environment. Rob concluded that markets are demanding environments for frontline organisations ('customers') and support organisations ('providers') alike.

The research on capacity building voucher schemes noted how they each sought to channel resources (vouchers) directly to frontline organisations, so that they could choose and purchase the support they require from amongst a range of providers. But smaller organisations were seen to struggle in this environment, and were thought to be less aware of their support needs, and slower to engage with a range of providers. Overall, frontline organisations seemed to prefer working with those they know already, rather than 'shopping around' amongst providers. There was some common learning amongst the three schemes, particularly around the need to pay more attention to diagnostic processes to understand support needs of frontline organisations. The research concluded that the schemes appear to involve considerable intervention and more shaping than their designers anticipated.

The second study was commissioned by the Big Lottery Fund to examine the evidence base on what works in building capabilities for frontline organisations. Among other things, the study highlighted the importance of diagnostic or organisation review processes as a valuable form of capability building in their own right, and suggested that the diagnostic

'moment' provides a good opportunity to look back at an organisation's previous development of strengths over time. Overall the study suggested proceeding with caution with a marketised approach to building capabilities.

### **References:**

Macmillan, R. and Ellis-Paine, A., with Kara, H., Dayson, C., Sanderson, E. and Wells, P. (2014) Building Capabilities in the Voluntary Sector: What the evidence tells us (TSRC Research Report 125, Birmingham, Third Sector Research Centre).

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/reports/research-report-125-building-capabilities.pdf>

Walton, C. and Macmillan, R. (2014) A brave new world for voluntary sector infrastructure? Vouchers, markets and demand-led capacity building (TSRC Working Paper 118, Birmingham, Third Sector Research Centre)

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/working-papers/working-paper-118.pdf>

### **Key Discussion Points**

Participant discussion focused on the following 6 points:

- Is there any evidence that, where there are existing training and support 'markets' (such as the Big Assist) that these actually work?
- Why create a market, or quasi-market, in training and developmental support for the sector at a time when 'traditional' infra-structure bodies were facing cuts or, in some cases, closed completely?
- Is a 'market' an appropriate model for responding to sector support needs?
- Would a 'market' favour larger voluntary organisations at the expense of small community groups?
- How would quality be assured in the market-place?
- Many small groups are not really aware of their training and support needs. Needs assessment is crucial and this seems to be missing from a marketised model



**Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)  
Voluntary and Community Sector Rural  
Voice and Influence**

Phil Ware  
Honorary Research Fellow  
TSRC



The research aims to identify the voice and situation of the Black and Minority Ethnic Voluntary and Community Sector (BME VCS) in rural areas and areas of the country (England) where BME communities have been traditionally underrepresented. The research aims to identify the voice of the BME VCS in relation to:

- the rural VCS as a whole,
- local, regional and national policy makers and funders
- Mainstream provision

The research is being undertaken using a literature review and semi-structured interviews with BME led community groups (18) and strategic voluntary and statutory organisations (8) in Cumbria, Hereford and Worcester, and the South West. Participants in the interviews were from a wide range of backgrounds, including African, African Caribbean, South Asia and East European and South American. The research started in November 2103 and will be completed in early 2015. The findings will disseminated through TSRC and BME networks and participants.

## **Findings**

The following are headline findings from an initial analysis of the literature and transcripts of the interviews: -

- There is limited literature available, particularly in book form, over the past 10 years.
- In relation to populations there is a lack of critical mass, generally a wide range of backgrounds and languages. Cuts to local transport and employment patterns are important factors.
- Organisation is often in relation to individuals, often with a focus on social and cultural activities. Many groups are fragmented and activity tends to be prevalent in the urban parts of rural areas.
- At a strategic level there is the disappearance of the infrastructure, particularly Race Equality Councils (RECs), with little connection to strategic power base. It was also recognised that the 'mainstream' VCS is also under its own pressures due to a lack of resources.
- Comments on racism included the host community seen as being in denial, isolation exaggerates the effects, and schools are often the first experience of racism for individuals. Quotes included 'The black vote doesn't matter to them' and 'Black people don't drink tea.'

## **Resilience**

There are examples of resilience in all the areas researched. These include: -

- Populations increasing and starting to organise
- A project in the South West that is surviving and developing
- Some projects engaging with host communities.

## **Challenges and Questions**

The workshop looked at a number of questions including - How do you organise when there is no critical mass? Is racism worse or different in rural areas than urban areas? How important are issues of wealth and class in relation to ethnicity in rural areas? How will statutory and voluntary organisations respond to changes in the rural population profile?

## Community Action and Social Media (CASM)

Kevin Harris, Local Level

There is no hashtag for  
this presentation, ok?



This research will explore the ways in which community groups and organisations use social media. Our initial intention has been to understand how groups and social movements use these technologies to *organise* and to *mobilise* and we noted some differences between these concepts: 'organising' implies leadership, structure, funding, organisational status, perhaps political acceptability, and so on; whereas 'mobilising' implies disruption, swift radical action, and voiced protest. We also noted that use of social technologies for these purposes can make either direct or indirect contributions to a group's objectives. For example:

- (Direct) ... mobilising support through petitions or attendance at events or on protests
- (Indirect) ... fundraising, informing, developing relationships, keeping engaged.

However it may be that we need to use a less specific approach and gain an understanding of use more generally, if this is what is most needed for the sector.

The short presentation highlighted the fact that some of the issues are not new: for example the concepts of 'self-publishing' and 'horizontal communication' were being discussed by pioneers in the 1980s. And the often-cited response 'it's not for the likes of us' has characterized the introduction of many popular technologies.

The presentation also noted that these are essentially *personal* networking tools and we may be looking in the wrong direction if we focus on 'organisational' uses. Nonetheless social media offers clear benefits, such as (by way of a starter list):

1. Significant 'democratisation of voice' – although there are well-known negative sides to this
2. It's easier to find like-minded people
3. It's inexpensive to find ways of collaborating.

In group work, participants contributed a number of valuable insights, questions and comments, including for example the following:

- Social media offers additional ways of contacting people or being contacted (asynchronous but still mostly fast)
- Facebook is effective at the community level
- Downsides including trolling and the fact that not everyone understands how to use these technologies
- Streaming social media on basic websites can be confusing and detrimental
- Social media could replace the 'need' for websites, for some groups
- It helps 'to get the word out quickly'
- Barriers to use include:
  - Access to equipment
  - Knowledge of how to use
  - Is there free support?
  - How do you measure outcomes?
  - Who gets to tweet? (power relations)

Among the possible research questions raised were the following:

'Social media doesn't hold critical dialogue: issues become more polarised or superficial' – is this true?

Does social media disadvantage disabled people and their groups in spite of the advantages offered by IT generally?

If you would like to offer further suggestions; are interested in contributing to the research; or would like us to keep in touch as it progresses, please contact

Kevin Harris, Local Level

[kevin@local-level.org.uk](mailto:kevin@local-level.org.uk)

## Faith in Social Action?

Angus McCabe Third Sector Research Centre and Steve Miller, Faith Based Regeneration

The poster features the following elements:

- TSRC** logo: Informing civil society
- Event Title:** Faith in Social Action? Faith and inter-faith responses to changing community needs.
- Date and Location:** Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2014, University of Birmingham
- Speakers:** Angus McCabe, Steve Miller, Heather Buckingham & Marcianne Uwimana
- Hosted by:** UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM, UNIVERSITY OF Southampton
- Funded by:** Cabinet Office (Office for Civil Society), BARROW CADBURY, E.S.R.C. (Economic and Social Research Council)

These are controversial times for faith based organisations. From foodbanks to the prevention of violent extremism they are expected to play an increasingly important role in the delivery of a wide range of Government policies – from responding to welfare reform, through to connecting diverse communities and the development of faith schools. Yet, despite this increased role, there has been little research into how faith groups are involved at the local level with communities, or effective interfaith work at a wider policy level.

The findings of this research, based on a detailed literature review, in depth interviews with 31 faith-based organisations and a feedback focus group, will be published in early 2015. This session, therefore, drew on **‘five faithful statements’**: statements that reflected common themes across interviews and faith groups. Participants were shown each of these statements – that faith groups had made about themselves – and asked:

- 1 do you agree with the statement?
- 2 would you challenge the statement?
- 3 what are the implications of the statement?

Feedback on the exercise is summarised in the text boxes overleaf.

**We are administering the new poor laws for the 21st century....without the resources.**

- Do we have the power to 'administer' poor laws?
- Do the new poor laws mean that those with power and resources make the decisions about who is helped?
- Grassroots responses are often less judgemental and discriminatory than poor law assumptions.
- The idea of 'laws' implies both compulsion and subversion.
- Some organisations are very well resourced and willing to administer poor law approaches to welfare.

**The state has withdrawn. The voluntary organisations left when the money ran out. Faith groups are all that is left here.**

- Community activism is not dependent on faith: belief maybe.
- Lots of non-faith community action is also going on.
- The majority of action is not faith based. What about us?
- Where is the evidence?
- What is the appropriate balance in funding faith and non-faith based action?
- What about communities more generally – rather than just faith based communities?
- The most effective faith based groups are those that stimulate action – not just services. See the campaigns like faith in rural housing.

**We are working with the most vulnerable people at a time when there is increasing public hostility to welfare.**

- Not all faith groups work with the most vulnerable. Some pick and choose.
- Many faith groups do work with vulnerable people – but by no means all.

**Inter-faith works.....when you do/do not leave god at the door.**

- You cannot have faith groups, and therefore inter-faith groups, without God.
- Is personal faith the same as organised religion?
- Do we, then, also need to leave culture at the door?

- Leaving God 'at the door' (or not) depends on your starting point and why you are trying to organise on an inter-faith basis? A better understanding of faith and differences or trying to do something for the community/social justice?
- Why involve a higher deity when working across communities?
- Can't we just have faith in people, their possibilities and needs – rather than formal inter-faith structures?

**Any rationale debate about the role of faith groups has been hijacked by Islamophobia, 'Trojan horse', the prevention of violent extremism agenda and an aggressive secularism.**

- Are faith groups really immune to these agendas?
- Where is this aggressive secularism?
- Rationale debates are also hijacked by the establishment and political systems.
- The media is the real power in hijacking rationale debate.
- Was there ever really rationale debate on some of these issues?

**Other comments/questions/observations.**

- What is the difference between services that are 'purely voluntary' and zero hours contracts and exploitation?
- There is a real debate to be had about ethics/entitlements/rights to services in a post-welfare state landscape. Who gets marginalised and are there different degrees of marginalisation?
- Can we put a £ value on the contribution of faith groups in different fields – eg. Refugees, asylum seekers, foodbanks etc?
- Can we measure the social impact of faith groups?
- We need data and evidence to influence policy. Who is being affected by welfare reform, austerity etc. (Response) – Do we really need data and evidence when change at the moment is being ideologically driven?
- Why so little progress on evaluation and social Impact. Voluntary and community groups are still asking for toolkits but there are already hundreds.
- How does local context affect the effectiveness of faith based organisations? Eg – minority faith groups operating in a majority faith area and vice versa.
- There is a need to critically explore the role of faith groups in building 'community

cohesion’.

- We need to look at how open/’big’ data can be beneficial to community groups. But we also need to make sure that communities are empowered and able to advocate on their own behalf – and that they know how to challenge policies.
- Are there not tensions between faith based perspectives and activities and equalities agendas?

What was emerging from the research was a sense of ‘conflicted faith’ in terms of responding to austerity measures, welfare reform and other policy developments. Conflict that faith ‘required’ groups to serve their communities – whilst, at the same time, wishing to challenge Government on the impact of austerity measures on the poorest communities. What the reference group exercise indicated that the research also needs to be critically reflective on the statements, or ‘claims’, faith groups make about themselves in the current climate.

## The Future Research Agenda

Angus McCabe reported that previous Reference Group meetings and events such as this had been influential in shaping the 'below the radar' research agenda. In particular, the workstream had focused on the relationship between community groups, community action and equalities agendas. Whilst not every research idea could be responded to the aim of this session was to inform TSRC as a whole, as well as below the radar work in particular, of emerging issues for the sector that required research. A work programme for below the radar is already in place for 2014-15 (developed in consultation with the Reference Group) and included reports on:

- Rural BME community groups (Phil Ware)
- Community responses to destitute refugees, asylum seekers and migrants (Adrian Randall)
- The role of social media in community actions (Angus McCabe and Kevin Harris).  
Ideas for future research themes included:
- Examples of new/emerging practice in the voluntary and community sector in response to austerity
- The role of the sector on policy and campaigning in the run up to the 2015 General Election
- Are voluntary organisations distinctive any more. If not – does it matter? If yes – in what ways?
- The role of philanthropy in sector support in austere times.
- The changing relationship between government and the sector – but more particularly between the sector and private sector businesses.
- What matters most for voluntary organisations – mission, purpose or survival?
- How do we address organisational inequalities?
- Is the Charity Commission – and Charity Law – fit for purpose?
- How/do voluntary organisations challenge media presentations of issues such as poverty, migration etc?
- The relationship between the sector, Local Economic Partnerships and the 'reinvention of regionalism'.
- How/are community groups responding to demographic change in neighbourhoods – eg aging population, increased diversity etc?

There was much debate on measuring social value and meaningful 'toolkits' that measure not only monetarised impacts of voluntary organisations – but ***then a final plea*** that – rather than 'measuring' social value – the real question is what difference do community groups and community action make in society was the real research question.

## Attendance

Angela Eikenberg	University of Nabaska
Angus McCabe	TSRC
Christine Goodhall	HEAR Human Rights
Cristiana Falsaperla	Focus Ireland
Daniel Conteh	Celestinecelest Community Organisation
David Hirst	Migrant Voice
David Mullins	University of Birmingham
David Stoesz	University of Illinois
Debbie Pippard	Barrow Cadbury Trust
Fathi Elsadig Jamil	CRIS
Fharat Rehman	Birmingham City Council
Helga Edstrom	OCS, Cabinet Office
Ioana Cerasella Chis	Birmingham University
Janice Marks	FCDL
Kames Rees	TSRC
Jayne Francis	MEL
Jeremy Grant	Sandwell Volunteer Centre
John Mohan	TSRC
Kelly Walsh	Community Development Foundation
Kevin Harris	Local Level
Lucy Dalecliff	University of Manchester
Mandy Wilson	Independent
Pauline Roche	RnR Organisation
Phil Ware	TSRC
Rob Macmillan	TSRC
Saadia Mahmood	Muslim Charities Forum
Steve Miller	Faith Based Regeneration Network
Tarisai Gogoda	St Basil's Coventry

Virginia Ringane	Celestinecelest Community Organisation
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### **Apologies**

Amy Cui	Birmingham Chinese Community Centre
Asif Afridi	BRAP
Chris Ford	Independent
Fiona Purle	Mason Purle Studios
Gary Craig	University of Durham
James Derounian	University of Gloucestershire
Joy Warmington	BRAP
Mike Perry	Plunkett Foundation
Phil Henry	Derby Inter Faith Centre
Robin Simpson	Voluntary Arts
Sioned Churchill	Trust for London
Tony Purle	Mason Purle Studios

## About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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## Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

## Contact the author

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