

Briefing Paper 33

Understanding the distinctiveness of small scale, third sector activity: the role of local knowledge and networks in shaping below the radar actions

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Introduction

'Below the radar' has become a short-hand term for small community groups, organisations or activities that are either not registered with the Charity Commission or other regulatory body and lack a regular, substantial annual income. Much of the existing research into the Third Sector has focused on larger more formal organisations and there are gaps in the knowledge base around the nature and function of small groups and more informal activities which happen at a community level.

The following briefing and accompanying working paper is based on interviews with representatives from national community sector organisations, development agencies, members of policy fora and academics with a background in community based research. It explores the scale, scope and function of 'below the radar' activity in the Third Sector, why people become active within their community and the factors which both help and hinder community based action. Finally the paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of 'below the radar' action, and issues of accountability, and asks the question: are there features that make more informal community organisation and activity distinctive?

Below the radar as a description of community activity

Views were divided on the usefulness of the term 'below the radar' to describe small scale community groups and activities. Most of those interviewed were aware of the term and understood it to mean community based groups with very limited income and those not registered with the Charity Commission or other regulatory bodies. For some 'it does say something that is a truth. There's a whole mess of vibrant life going on that's not recognised'. Others raised the question 'below whose radar'? Whilst for some the term was 'unhelpful as it presented a deficit model' implying that small groups lacked the capacity to grow and thrive.

Function and importance

BTR groups were seen as fulfilling multiple functions. These ranged from providing small-scale and fairly informal services, through to advocacy, strengthening local democracy, building social justice, contributing to community cohesion and cultural identities, offering leisure activities and acting as '*the social glue*' that binds individuals and communities together,

The importance of BTR activities was their flexibility, adaptability and ability to identify

and respond to need as well as bringing unmet or unrecognised issues to the attention of mainstream agencies.

There were concerns that there was an increasing expectation that such groups could *'fill the gaps when statutory services withdraw from an area'*, were seen as a *'cheaper option'* in tackling social problems, and were being *'pushed'* into service delivery roles which changed their purpose and ethos.

The scale of BTR action

Two interviewees described the formal voluntary sector as 'the tip of the iceberg' and that 'most of the community organisations are below the water as in an ice-berg and that has profound implications on how that sector is seen and understood and in terms of relationships of power as well, you can have quite a skewed picture – because the bit below the water is not recognised in terms of voice, in terms of policy or even research proposals'

Estimates as to actual size (and the desirability or feasibility of actually quantifying community activity varied. However, the overall view was that there were between 600,000 and 900,000 below the radar groups in the UK – suggesting that this part of the Third Sector is between three and four times larger than the formal charity/voluntary sector.

Distinctiveness

What emerged from the interviews was a picture of a discreet series of 'sub-sectors' rather than a coherent or homogeneous 'community sector'. There were key differences, and claims of 'uniqueness' from faith groups, Black and Minority Ethnic/Refugee and Migrant Organisations, arts/cultural based activities and from rural perspectives.

There were, however a range of agreements which identified common characteristics which distinguished BTR activity from the formal Third Sector.

Distinctive features included: informality, responsiveness, the blurring of boundaries between personal and civic lives (activists *'never clock off'*), a focus on mutual aid, being uninhibited by bureaucracy and driven by political, social, cultural or faith values. These characteristics enabled BTR groups to *'take risks'* on responding to needs in ways that were not open to more formal, professionalised, voluntary organisations.

A further common theme was that such groups were much closer to their communities than mainstream statutory and voluntary agencies and were therefore both a rich resource of intelligence about, and gate-keepers to, both neighbourhoods and communities of interest. Whilst the policy rhetoric around sustainable communities and building social capital were noted, there was a shared feeling across interviews that very small scale community activity tended to be undervalued; both in terms of its impact on social health, and well being and as a bridge between political systems/bureaucracies and communities.

Resources

The difficulties of many small organisations securing financial resources to sustain and grow activity at a grass roots level were commented on. On the other hand it was acknowledged that some organisations that may be below policy and other radars had substantial capital resources in terms of owned assets (e.g. community centres) and often had the capacity to raise funding from within their own communities rather than applying to statutory bodies and grant making trusts.

The key resources were however, human rather than financial: the knowledge and skills brought by activists:

'in terms of people and resources, I think there's an awful lot of barter, there's an awful lot of gift exchange goes on. I think the goodwill of friends and family and community accounts for an awful lot in keeping these places (community centres/village halls)

running in practice. I mean I don't think their balance sheets represent, you know, the true value of what gets put into them, what gets generated by them'.

Concerns were expressed however around;

- the loss of these human resources as those active in community groups 'burnt out' under both internal community and external agency imposed pressures
- The impact of start-stop funding regimes were seen as reinforcing degrees of scepticism and disillusionment within communities.

BTR: advantages and disadvantages

A number of disadvantages were identified in terms of below the radar, community activity. Small groups may be unable to respond to the sheer scale of local needs and act as 'a band aid on a haemorrhage'. They may operate in relative isolation and be constantly 're-inventing wheels'. Where grassroots networks did exist, these were seen as 'horizontal' rather than 'vertical' resulting in a lack of strategic and policy influence or recognition. Given the basis for many such groups was members shared beliefs or interests some could, both intentionally and unintentionally, become exclusive. Charismatic leaders were often the catalyst for below the radar action; though groups could be vulnerable when such characters left or operated in particularly autocratic ways.

There were, however, distinct advantages to small scale activity – not least the sense of connection with, and knowledge of, neighbourhoods and communities of interest. The approaches taken by such groups tended not only to be flexible but also holistic – meeting the needs of 'the whole person' rather than a compartmentalised approach which was seen as characteristic of large voluntary and statutory sector agencies. Flexibility also allowed community activists to take risks, experiment, and try new approaches to addressing community issues.

There was also some debate across interviews as to whether below the radar groups lack of take up/access to statutory funding sources and large grant making trusts meant that they were less vulnerable in the economic recession than those Third Sector organisations holding contracts and service level agreements with Central/Local Government and other statutory commissioners.

Impact

Interviewees identified three levels of impact for below the radar groups and activities:

Individual: over-coming social isolation and promoting the health and mental well-being of members.

Group/community: delivering small scale services at the local level, sustaining cultural identities, breaking down barriers to social cohesion and acting as advocates for marginalised communities.

Societal: individually the impact of below the radar groups was seen as limited. However, at a wider societal level, that impact was seen as cumulative. Community based activity was therefore vital to a vibrant democracy, ensuring that (where possible) policy and services responded to 'actual community needs' and were reported as 'the bedrock' an active, healthy and diverse civil society.

Some of those interviewed, particularly from the arts and cultural industries felt that the economic impact of small groups had been under-researched and under-estimated. For them, below the radar activity could play a vital role in generating money in, and circulating finance around, communities: through the hire of venues, organising festivals and event and, in Black and Minority Ethnic groups through informal credit and savings schemes.

BTR: challenges and issues

Below the radar groups were reported as facing a number of challenges, over and above securing financial resources. The pressures to become formalised (not least to secure funding) and grow meant that some groups had risked losing a sense of their original purpose, their connectedness with their communities and flexibilities as they became more professional and employed staff. Conversely, long established community groups may become moribund, unable or unwilling to attract new members, and irrelevant to changing community needs.

'Skills shortages' were also reported. Activists may be unaware of relevant law and regulations which impact on the group's activity, lack management and organising skills and, with a predominantly localised focus, fail to have an understanding of their role within '*the bigger picture*' of communities and society. Further, in terms of legislation, an inherent tension was viewed as that between regulation to protect vulnerable people that below the radar groups worked with versus legal requirements that were onerous and '*put people off*' becoming active.

The nature of democracy in community groups was strongly contested throughout interviews. On the one hand, the flexibility and informality of below the radar groups meant that they lacked any wider accountability beyond the immediate membership and could be 'high-jacked' by maverick individuals. On the other hand, activists were viewed as much more directly accountable within their community, albeit informally: '*if people do not knock at your door you are not good enough*'.

Supporting BTR activity

Three factors were seen as vital to the growth and proliferation of below the radar, community based, activity.

- A place to meet and develop networks.
- The history and culture of activism within

particular communities '*which can be a post code lottery*'

- A sympathetic Local Authority, willing to support such activity through access to, for example, affordable venues and accessible legal and related advice.

Respondents in both urban and rural settings reported the importance of '*starting where groups were at*'. This often involved '*simple advice*' on where to access venues or signposting to other groups with interests and '*learning from each other*'

A range of capacity building approaches and initiatives were criticised as being over-bureaucratic and '*an assessment based approach*' related to contractual targets and policy directives rather than group needs.

Conclusions

Below the radar activity, both in neighbourhoods and in communities of interest can be characterised by diversity. As a result, interviews surfaced a number of '*counter-statements*' about such activity: community groups were, alternatively inclusive and/or exclusive: (some) were dynamic, flexible and fluid: (others) stagnant and moribund no longer relevant to community needs.

Common themes did, however, emerge. Small scale community activity was vital to individual health and well-being. Such groups often provided crucial services '*on a human scale*', addressed unmet or unrecognised needs and, were a unique resource in terms of local knowledge and intelligence. Their connectedness to their communities and holistic response to needs made below the radar action distinctive from the more bureaucratic, highly formal, agencies. Quantifying the number of such groups/activities is problematic; as is measuring their economic impact. However, for a diverse range of interviewees, small scale community based activity formed a '*social glue*' that was critical to the health of society yet un-seen and undervalued.

This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsrc.ac.uk for more details and a copy of the full Working Paper 33.

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