No longer a 'voluntary' sector?

Heather Buckingham

The input of voluntary resources – in the form of donations, volunteer trustees, or volunteering activity - has traditionally been a defining feature of third sector organisations (TSOs). Recent debates about the payment of charity trustees however, have brought concerns about the erosion of voluntarism within the third sector to the fore. Such concerns have been a topic of conversation amongst academics, practitioners and policy-makers since at least the early 1990s, but the current context presents some unique and pressing dilemmas and opportunities for the sector.

The third sector's impact on society depends strongly on the people that populate it: volunteers, and the paid workforce. In this discussion, therefore, we are primarily concerned with the third sector workforce and the issues and trends that are likely to shape the roles and impact that future managers, staff and volunteers have within society. Findings from the TSRC's recent and ongoing research bring new insights to such discussions, as well as opening up new areas for debate.

The third sector workforce

If we are concerned with the future of the third sector, we should also be interested in the numbers, roles, motivations and working conditions of its workforce and what these might look like in years to come. It therefore makes sense to begin by getting a sense of the scale and composition of the third sector workforce as it stands.

Volunteering is difficult to measure, and there are questions about precisely what activities should be classed as volunteering (under what circumstances, for instance, does informal help given to family members, friends or neighbours become volunteering?) (Working Paper 6). Researchers therefore tend to distinguish between formal volunteering (unpaid help or work done in the context of an organisation or group) and informal volunteering (that done outside of a group context). Data on formal volunteering from the Citizenship Survey tell us that about 40-45% of the adult population volunteer at least once a year, while 25-29% of UK adults volunteer at least once a month. The Citizenship Survey also asked respondents how many hours of unpaid help they had given in the past four weeks. Analysis of this data (for 2007 to 2010) showed that nearly 90% of the total hours volunteered were provided by just over 1/3 of the population (Working Paper 73). Researchers also found that people tended to engage either in high levels of giving, or of volunteering: high levels of involvement in both was unusual.

Levels of participation in formal volunteering have remained relatively stable between 2001 and 2011, although there has been a slight decline since involvement peaked in 2005. However, this does not necessarily mean that

volunteering is as popular with the current generation of young adults, say, than with previous generations. TSRC research on membership of voluntary associations reveals difference across social groups: levels of membership were lower amongst men born between 1955 and 1964 and between 1965-1974 than for those born in earlier cohorts. For women, those born between 1965 and 1974 also had lower levels of membership than those in previous cohorts, when age was controlled for. Whilst membership of voluntary organisations is not equivalent to volunteering, it is a useful indication of involvement in the third sector, and the findings raise concerns about whether such involvement will fall as more engaged earlier generations are replaced by less engaged cohorts.

Estimates of employment in the third sector vary considerably depending on the data sources and the definitions used (Working Paper 80). The number of full time equivalent employees in the UK voluntary sector is estimated to have increased by 40% between 2001 and 2011 with the most rapid growth occurring between 2008 and 2010. According to the most recent Labour Force Survey Data the number of people working in the voluntary and community sector stands at 774,862. However, when a broader definition of the third sector is taken, the number of employees is considerably higher. The National Survey of Third Sector Organisations (2008) was used to calculate third sector employment in England based on data relating to organisations, rather than individual employees, giving rise to an estimate of 1,179,000 FTE employees (Working Paper 80). This higher figure is in part due to the broader definition used, but is also explained by the fact that the LFS only captures people's main jobs, so will not include individuals who work in the voluntary sector as a second job. This research also showed that third sector employment followed similar regional trends to those exhibited in the wider economy, with FTE jobs being concentrated in London and the SE. The authors point out that this distribution 'doesn't suggest that the third

sector is going to be a major employment generator in the most disadvantaged regions any time soon'.

Does the distribution of volunteers match demand?

The individuals identified as being most involved in charitable giving, volunteering and civic participation (according to the Citizenship Survey)- termed the 'civic core' - were found to be 'drawn predominantly from the most prosperous, middle-aged and highly educated sections of the population, and … are most likely to live in the least deprived parts of the country' (Working Paper 73). Another TSRC study into the relationship between volunteering, social capital and deprivation showed that deprived areas had lower levels of both social capital and volunteering than more affluent areas. This raises concerns about a geographical mismatch between areas where the third sector's services are most needed, and those where resources are most available. However, at present we do not know where those in the civic core are volunteering, or where their donated income ends up. We also do not know how much of this voluntary activity is oriented towards meeting the types of social needs for which the state might typically be deemed to be responsible. Much voluntary activity is oriented towards meeting needs for social interaction and enjoyment, not necessarily towards meeting policy goals (although these may at times overlap) (Working Paper 51). Data show that the most popular areas of involvement for formal volunteers were sports and exercise (52%); hobbies, recreation, arts and social clubs (40%) and children's education/schools (34%).

The uneven geographical distribution of voluntary activity is nevertheless a particularly pressing concern in the light of the recently passed Localism Act, and efforts to shift power (and with it, arguably, responsibility) from central government to communities, individuals and councils.

Is volunteer labour being misconstrued as free labour?

The recent Task Force report *Unshackling Good Neighbours* identified a number of barriers that prevent people from giving both time and money. Many of the barriers identified were of a practical or legal nature, and no doubt measures to address these could go some way towards increasing voluntary activity. However, the report seemed to overlook the fact that resource constraints might restrict individuals' capacity to give. One might anticipate, for instance, that absolute levels of charitable giving would be lower in more deprived areas where incomes are generally lower. Similarly, time can be seen as a commodity or resource that is given away at a cost, and financial security within a household may enable one of more of its members to be more readily released for involvement in voluntary activity. These issues are also apparent amongst young people (mainly graduates) working unpaid as 'interns' in the charity sector as a means of gaining the work experience necessary for accessing paid work: research has found that because this opportunity relies on self financing or support from parents, participation is skewed towards the middle classes.

Involvement in volunteering not only involves the cost of lost income for hours that might have been spent doing paid work, but it can also involve sacrificing time that might have been used to care for or interact with family members, or for (other) leisure activities, for example. Paid work commitments may prevent individuals from participating generously in formal volunteering, and wider socio-economic conditions affecting housing and labour markets can have a significant impact on people's availability for this.

This raises questions about who will shoulder the cost of the responsibilities being devolved to communities, families and individuals, and about whether these costs – and the varying abilities of different local communities to meet them - have been factored into decisions to increase the delivery of services by third sector organisations in order (at least in part) to reduce costs. Furthermore, involving volunteers is not free to the organisations that do so and the costs entailed in supporting and training volunteers also needs to be considered by those promoting volunteering as part of the Big Society agenda.

Are volunteers being marginalised?

Concerns that the professionalization of TSOs and their services pushes volunteers to the margins of the third sector became particularly significant during the New Labour years as TSOs became increasingly involved in formal government contracts for service delivery, and as increased funding allowed the sector's paid workforce to grow. Recent analysis suggests that around 80% of organisations with over 100 staff receive public money, regardless of how many volunteers they have, whereas organisations that are more "voluntary" (i.e. with fewer employees, or none) are less likely it is to receive public money.

Research into the impact of contracting on homelessness TSOs, found that those that were heavily dependent on contractual income did not tend to involve volunteers in core service provision roles ([Working Paper 41](#)). As TSOs take on an increasing role in the delivery of front line health and social care to vulnerable people, the professional responsibilities involved often mitigate against the use of volunteers. Data from the Real Times project suggests that for service delivery organisations the issue of how and where to deploy volunteers is being negotiated in relation to internal debates about mission and quality and pressures from the wider commissioning environment. However, the relatively stable figures on volunteer participation reported above suggest that paid employment in the sector does not necessarily crowd out voluntary participation, and it may be that professionalization in certain parts of the sector has led to a re-positioning of volunteers both within and between TSOs.

The level and nature of volunteer involvement in an organisation is influenced by the type of TSO, its ethos and aims, the service being provided and the extent to which the organisation is involved in contractual relations. In the homelessness study mentioned above a group of community-based volunteer-run organisations were identified which did not provide services commissioned by local government, but instead 'served functions that family and friends might otherwise have provided, such as companionship, hospitality, emotional support and meeting financial or physical needs in emergencies'. The involvement of volunteers was found to be fundamental to these TSOs' ability to meet such needs, because it 'facilitated the development of informal relationships and a degree of social integration with wider communities' ([Working Paper 50](#)).

It may be that there are certain 'niche' roles that are best filled by volunteers, perhaps particularly amongst groups where professionals are mistrusted, or where the fact that someone chooses to care voluntarily could have a significant impact on another's wellbeing. Volunteers may also have an important role in meeting the increasing need for culturally sensitive services that are tailored to particular ethnic or religious groups ([Working Paper 37](#)). Locality, community and the size of organisations are also important factors. Research in a community in the north east, where unemployment was high due to the decline of traditional industries, found that the large numbers of unemployed people in a community provided an important and valuable resource for the delivery of health and social care at the local level. In these smaller, local organizations, relations between paid and volunteer staff were productive and positive. As organizations became larger and operated across multiple sites, more tensions between paid and unpaid staff and 'head office' became apparent.

Is too much being asked of volunteers?

Whilst there may be roles that are more effectively and appropriately filled by volunteers, there is also a danger that the continuing emphasis on increasing TSOs' involvement in public service provision contracts, coupled with reduced local government budgets and public services expenditure, will lead to excessive work and responsibilities falling to volunteers. This has important implications in relation to the capacity of volunteers and the quality and consistency of services provided ([Working Paper 50](#)). Research suggests that where TSOs' clients have highly complex needs, it is 'problematic to assume that these services could be run either by volunteers alone or without considerable training or support' (Working Paper 90 forthcoming).

It is important not to underestimate what volunteers and voluntarily resourced action can achieve: research on small voluntary organisations, community groups and more informal or semi-formal activities in the third sector (known as 'below the radar' (BTR) organisations) found that 'not all groups lacked resources. Some could marshal considerable funds when needed; often from within their own deprived communities' ([Working Paper 33](#)). However, a note of caution should be sounded to those seeking to harness such capacity for policy purposes, because whilst the BTR organisations could contribute to achieving policy goals (e.g. in employment, regeneration, etc.), one of their key strengths was found to lie in their ability to operate independently from the state, and to maintain a radical ethos.

Crucially too, the BTR organisations were not able to address structural level problems and 'lacked the coverage or consistency needed' to provide a strategic response to issues such as social exclusion. In a similar vein, researchers investigating volunteering and local deprivation found that deprivation was primarily related to economic factors beyond the control of local communities. It is therefore important to

consider what the limitations of localized voluntary activity might be, and what provisions will be made to ensure that service provision and resource distribution acts to alleviate, rather than accentuate, existing socio-inequalities?

Is voluntarism bigger than the Big Society?

Much debate and research about the third sector has focused on its relationship with the state, which became particularly significant in the context of New Labour's emphasis on partnership and the increased involvement of TSOs in public service provision contracts. The Coalition's approach to the third sector in some respects represents a continuation of this approach, but a significant point of departure has been the reduction of public funding for the sector, both through the closure of horizontal schemes such as Futurebuilders and Change-Up, as well as through cuts to local government budgets, which are a significant income source for many service-providing TSOs (Working Paper 82; Working Paper 51). Whilst these changes pose serious financial difficulties for many organisations, such conditions could prove to be a key juncture allowing the third sector to reassert its identity not in terms of its relationship to the state, or its contribution to policy goals, but in terms of the values, resources and goals of the organisations and individuals that comprise it.

A move of this kind could be seen to support the Coalition's objectives to increase volunteering and giving, and to devolve power from government to individuals and communities, putting the sector in a position where it is required to 'do more with less'. However, is it possible that the Big Society could be somewhat bigger and noisier than policy makers expect? The resistive potential of voluntary action and the campaigning and

advocacy roles of TSOs have received little attention in the policies that have emerged thus far, yet one might expect these to become more prominent and powerful in a context of economic difficulty and social inequality. As such, it may be that the current political and socio-economic situation sets a stage upon which the roles played by TSOs – and by the people working within the sector – can be reimagined and acted out in new ways, in turn giving them an opportunity to challenge some of the broader social, political and economic structures that they have often been confined to operate within.

The diversity of the third sector means that the organisations within it are likely to be affected by, and respond to the issues presented in this paper in different ways, and the role of the 'voluntary' will continue to differ between organisations of different sizes and types of activity. However, a number of key questions for discussion arise from the findings presented above:

- Do political expectations of the sector, and of voluntary effort more broadly, correspond with both the capacity and values of its paid and unpaid workers? If not, how might these tensions play out in the future?
- Do we expect volunteers and paid staff to fulfil different roles in TSOs? Is the current division of labour set to continue or change?
- Does the increasing professionalism of the sector herald the end of volunteering?
- Is volunteering becoming a necessary stage into paid employment?
- Can governments act to increase volunteering, or does voluntary action have to be just that, voluntary?
- Does the context of austerity present an opportunity for a reassertion of the 'voluntary' within the sector?

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