

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



TEN YEARS OF THE  
**THIRD  
SECTOR  
RESEARCH  
CENTRE**

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# FOREWORD



NCVO campaigned for many years for investment in the evidence base about the sector and since its inception, TSRC has been integral to our vision of a sector supported by the best quality research. Over the last decade, civil society, voluntary organisations and voluntary action have changed significantly. These changes together with recent challenges have intensified the compelling need for a better and more critical understanding through research and highlighted the importance of sharing knowledge between academia and non-academics. In that time, TSRC has contributed to building a stronger, more integrated evidence base and worked collaboratively with the sector to ensure that research findings could reach frontline organisations. TSRC's work in identifying trends over time has helped the sector think about future developments. It has greatly benefited from the insights of some excellent qualitative studies, and from TSRC's long-standing work on enhancing the quality of data on charity finance, conducted in partnership with NCVO through the UK Civil Society Almanac programme. As the sector continues to face a tough operating environment the need for independent, accessible evidence to inform policy and practice, and for long-term investment is greater than ever. We very much look forward to working with TSRC in the future to help build on the Centre's achievements and further develop knowledge exchange activities with the sector.

A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'Stuart', set against the blue background.

**Sir Stuart Etherington**  
Chief Executive, National Council  
for Voluntary Organisations

The Barrow Cadbury Trust supported TSRC from its inception and has contributed to its core costs for ten years. We were delighted to be asked to contribute to this publication which marks the Centre's tenth anniversary. Our support has been for three key reasons.

Firstly, we were committed to the establishment of a reliable and independent research base for understanding the role and structure of the third sector. TSRC has made significant contributions both in terms of building on the existing evidence base and more importantly, in providing high-quality and independent academic analyses which offer insights that go beyond what the sector itself is able to provide. We believe that TSRC's work in this regard has established firm foundations for the long term development of scholarship in the field.

Secondly, this Trust has a history of commitment to research on vulnerable and marginalised communities, and we have been particularly concerned that TSRC's activities cover the whole range of third sector activity, including small-scale and grassroots community organisations which are often on the frontline in terms of meeting urgent social needs and which are so often 'under the radar'. This has been a distinctive strand of TSRC's programmes throughout the Centre's operations to date, and we are grateful for the insights provided by TSRC's research in this area.

Thirdly, a Centre such as this needs to be informed by an active engagement with the users of research. TSRC has made strenuous efforts to gain the trust and support of third sector organisations as well as that of public sector bodies and other stakeholders. This extends from involvement in the design and development of research projects, through active engagement with emerging findings, to dissemination by a range of channels to ensure they get to practitioner audiences. TSRC's knowledge exchange activities have been a model for this crucial element of academic research.

In addition to the many published outputs of the Centre and its contributions to policy and practice debates, a particularly noteworthy achievement has been launching the careers of a number of early-career researchers, who have gone on to hold academic and non-academic positions. This may prove to be the lasting legacy of TSRC's work to date as there is now a network of former staff and students who are going to make distinctive contributions in their own right.



Still, there is more to be done in this field and the core functions of a centre such as this one are still going to be needed in the future. We are confident that TSRC and its networks will continue to be at the heart of third sector research. We congratulate TSRC on all the achievements described here, and wish it well in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sara Llewellyn'.

**Sara Llewellyn**  
Chief Executive, Barrow Cadbury Trust

March 2019



# INTRODUCTION

IT IS JUST OVER A DECADE SINCE THE THIRD SECTOR RESEARCH CENTRE (TSRC) WAS LAUNCHED, THANKS TO THE COMBINED EFFORTS OF ESRC, THE THEN OFFICE OF THE THIRD SECTOR, AND THE BARROW CADBURY TRUST, WHO PROVIDED CORE FUNDING UNTIL 2014.

## **THE CENTRE'S MISSION WAS A CHALLENGING ONE:**

to establish a robust evidence base for and about the third sector, and in particular about the distinctive impacts that the sector has. We were also charged with developing that mission in a collaborative manner, in partnership with third sector organisations, and we built stakeholder involvement into our activities from the start. We were also committed to making our findings, and those of others, as accessible as possible. Our goal was to act as a bridge between research, policy and practice, in order to shape debate and exchange knowledge that could enhance the development of civil society in the UK and beyond.

That support was a one-off initiative. However, in recognition of the particular need for a centre such as ours, and in acknowledgement of the impacts it had, we benefited from further core support from the Barrow Cadbury Trust (2013–18) and the University of Birmingham (2013–16). We are particularly grateful to both organisations whose funding has been integral to our subsequent development, supported by considerable success in obtaining research grants.

The first five years of TSRC were reported fully in 2014.<sup>1</sup> In this brochure we provide an overview of the past decade of activity, giving a flavour of key publications and impacts, and offering a longer-term perspective on our achievements to date. We open with brief details of our history, our ways of working with stakeholders, and our contributions to the evidence base. We then offer an overview of key themes of our research – themes which we think are likely to continue to be important to the research agenda. The wider impacts of the Centre are then outlined and we describe reasons for optimism about what may prove to be its enduring legacy: the development of a new generation of scholars in the field. We celebrated our anniversary in February 2019 with a conference in Birmingham, deliberately designed to be interactive and to generate debate amongst stakeholders and researchers. We conclude with some of the themes emerging from discussions on the day. There is much still to do and we look forward to sharing future research findings as they emerge.

**John Mohan**  
Director, TSRC



# ESTABLISHING TSRC

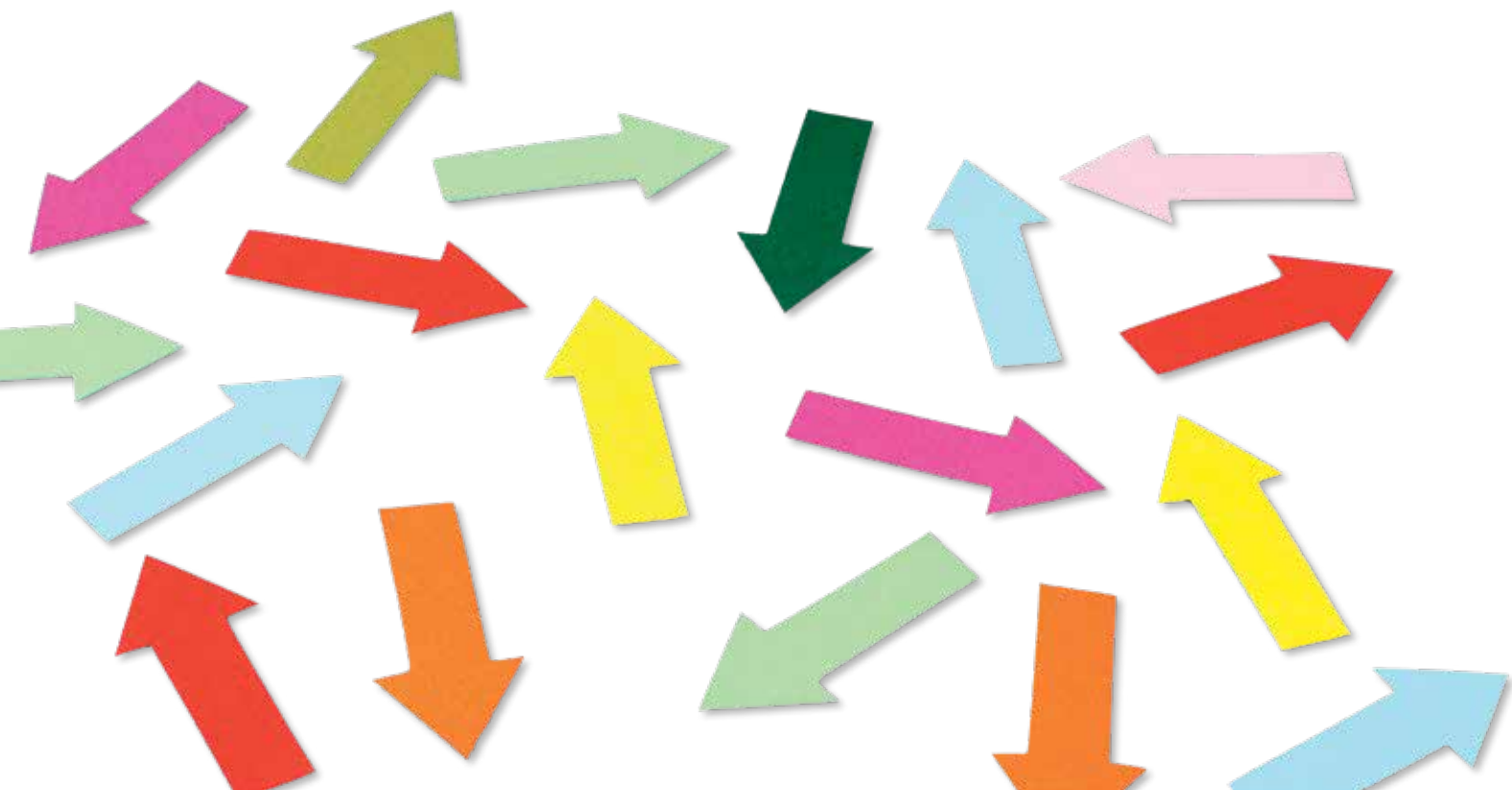
RESEARCH IN THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR FIELD IN THE UK HAS A HISTORY THAT ANTEDATES THE ESTABLISHMENT OF TSRC BY AROUND THREE DECADES. WE BEGIN BY ACKNOWLEDGING THE EFFORTS OF ACADEMIC AND PRACTITIONER ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS TO STIMULATE ACTIVITY FROM THE 1970s ONWARDS.

Particularly important in these were individual research centres at the LSE, Brunel and elsewhere; the significant roles played by the Charities Aid Foundation, NCVO and others in constructing the evidence base for the research endeavour; the vital role of organisations such as Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN) in bringing together academics and practitioners; and the commitment of many individual scholars.<sup>2</sup> Though not all of those involved would have subscribed to the idea that it was possible to demarcate a distinctive 'third sector', without the combined efforts of all those involved in these developments, there would not have been an identifiable academic field of research on voluntary action in the UK.

The foregoing initiatives took place against the background of a growing policy interest in the role of voluntary organisations, which was influenced both by critiques of bureaucratised

and remote statutory services and by a search for efficiencies in service delivery. Major inquiries and policy commissions such as the Wolfenden Report and the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector contributed to a growing volume of debate and scholarship.<sup>3</sup> Despite this growing interest there was no large-scale academic centre with the core funding that would enable a long-term programme of research.

It was not until the Labour government actively sought to expand the third sector's contribution to public service delivery that there was a prospect of changing this situation. The government's strategic intentions were set out in a key policy document – *The future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration* – or, as it was more commonly known, the *Third Sector Review*.







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**THE [TSRC] COLLABORATION MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE... IT PUT OUR SURVEY ON SOLID GROUND. THIS SHOWED LOTS OF CONFUSION IN THE SECTOR [IN RELATION TO IMPACT MEASUREMENT]... AND HELPED TSOs LOOK MORE CRITICALLY AT WHAT THEY WERE DOING AND HOW TO DO IT BETTER.**  
 ”

Published in 2007, the review appeared at a time when the then Labour government was keen to commission more third sector organisations and social enterprises to provide public services. It also led to the creation of the Office of the Third Sector (later renamed the Office for Civil Society).

The review highlighted the need for a better evidence base to inform policy towards the sector. As part of this it called for ‘the establishment of a new centre to take forward the important third sector research agenda’, adding: ‘The government believes that the building of a coherent evidence base about the sector, its organisations and their work is of paramount importance.’

At the same time the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), recognising the government’s increasing interest in the sector, proposed a Third Sector Engagement Strategy that identified gaps in social science research. The OTS agreed to contribute £5m towards the cost of a new centre through the 2007 comprehensive spending review period. The ESRC matched this sum and the Barrow Cadbury Trust gave £250,000.

In July 2008, Birmingham University and Southampton University were jointly awarded a five-year contract to run the centre along

with input from a number of third sector organisations, most notably the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO). Pete Alcock, then Head of the School of Social Sciences at Birmingham University, was appointed Director of the Centre. John Mohan, Professor of Social Policy at Southampton University, was appointed Deputy Director and would eventually succeed Alcock in 2014. TSRC constituted the largest investment in a UK-focussed research centre in this field by the ESRC (details of others are on their website).<sup>4</sup>

Though TSRC’s origins lay in the determination of sector stakeholders, government and research funders to improve the evidence base, the Centre’s activities range far more widely than that. They can best be summarised as following a broad research agenda which is concerned with the distinctive roles, resources and relationships of the third sector, broadly defined to include organisations of all sizes and carrying out a highly diverse range of activities that go beyond simply delivering public services. Those themes underpin the Centre’s current and ongoing research.

Since the one-off core funding for the Centre ceased in 2014, funding has been secured from numerous other sources. We have already mentioned ongoing core support from the

Barrow Cadbury Trust and from the University of Birmingham. With this vote of confidence in the impact of the Centre, at Birmingham a number of successful funding bids have supported, at any one time, up to eight researchers. TSRC staff have been regularly called upon to provide advice and support to significant national inquiries into the role of the sector, and the Centre has a high profile, as evidenced by the frequency with which our work is covered in the trade press such as Third Sector. In addition, as described in this brochure, former TSRC staff are now establishing themselves as independent researchers at other academic institutions in their own right. Research groupings at several universities (Sheffield Hallam, Kent, the Open University, and Glasgow Caledonian) now include one or more former TSRC staff. These groups, along with TSRC, form the major British presence at key international conferences in the field such as the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) and the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organisations and Voluntary Action. TSRC has provided a significant boost to research capacity in the field by recruiting a new generation of scholars, who will go on to develop the research agenda in their own distinctive ways.

# WORKING WITH STAKEHOLDERS

A KEY ELEMENT OF TSRC'S WORK HAS BEEN PROVIDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE IN THE FIELD. THIS HAS REQUIRED US TO THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT HOW BEST TO INVOLVE STAKEHOLDERS IN OUR RESEARCH AND ALSO ABOUT HOW BEST TO COMMUNICATE FINDINGS.

Our strategic approach to collaboration aims to reach a broad range of stakeholders while recognising that it is not feasible to work with very large numbers of individual organisations. Our closest single working relationship has been with NCVO; as well as providing the evidence base for the NCVO Almanac of Civil Society, we've collaborated with them on regional and local studies of the sector, open grantmaking data, and the sector workforce. We have, however, worked with a large range of other stakeholders over various timescales.

User engagement is integral to what we do: we have extensively involved the third sector and other stakeholders in our work by including them in advisory and reference groups for projects. This has enabled non-academics to shape the detail of our research projects. Our work with below the radar groups, described elsewhere in this document, was heavily informed by the perspectives of people working in frontline organisations.

We have established productive long-term partnerships with other individual organisations. Taking the long view has enabled us to look in detail at change in the sector. Our work on public service delivery with the criminal justice umbrella body, Clinks, is a good example of this. They were interested in collaborating over a period of years to monitor the impacts of changes to the probation system, and the partnership developed because of our experience in longitudinal qualitative research. Its findings were quoted in a 2017 Parliamentary inquiry.

An extensive collaboration with the social research charity, Mass Observation, has generated three further research projects which are contributing greatly to our understanding of voluntary action. Other longer-term collaborative projects include PhD studentships, supervised jointly with the National Trust and the then Institute for Volunteering Research. Another such award commences in 2019 with Near Neighbours.

We also recognise that not all voluntary organisations have the resources that enable them to engage with research. As such, we've attempted to take a very participatory approach to working with groups that may not have much prior experience of collaborating with universities, in an attempt to ensure what is often termed 'co-production' of research findings.<sup>5</sup>

Equally we have provided an opportunity for organisations to engage in debate about the wider implications of our findings. A good example was our Third Sector Futures dialogue in which we invited over a dozen selected individuals to debate position papers which summarised key findings from our extensive work programmes.<sup>6</sup> In addition many of our individual projects have included opportunities for stakeholders to engage with and debate findings.



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**TSRC'S RESEARCHERS AND LEADERSHIP TEAM DEVELOPED STRONG RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SECTOR AND GAINED A HUGE AMOUNT OF TRUST AND RESPECT. ITS APPROACH SHOWED THAT COLLABORATION CAN DELIVER AND THAT BEING IN IT FOR THE LONG TERM CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.**

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Neil Cleeveley, former Chief Executive, National Association  
for Voluntary and Community Action



# DEVELOPING THE EVIDENCE BASE

WHEN THE TSRC WAS ESTABLISHED, THERE WAS A NOTABLE ABSENCE OF A STRONG AND INDEPENDENT SOURCE FOR EVIDENCE ON THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR. WE'VE MADE THREE PRINCIPAL CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS TACKLING THIS.



## CONSTRUCTING QUANTITATIVE DATABASES

Although the Charity Commission and Companies House routinely gather data on voluntary organisations, not all of it is easily available. Moreover, no individual organisation was responsible for preserving data when the TSRC began in 2009. At that time, the momentum for open data initiatives was only just beginning to gather pace. We realised that if we were going to make meaningful statements about the numbers and types of organisations in the sector, and about change over time, we would have to do something about the data infrastructure.

We initially worked with the NCVO to pull together old versions of the Charity Commission register and construct a dataset that allows many thousands of charities to be tracked over time. The register had been computerised in the early 1990s and copies had been supplied to NCVO from time to time. In some cases we recovered the data from obsolete tape

drives which were over 15 years old. This took us back as far as we are likely to go for capturing data on charities in England and Wales over time. Our efforts mean researchers can now track the fortunes of thousands of charities going back more than 20 years. The datasets are public and can be downloaded from the UK Data Service.<sup>7</sup>

We have also worked closely with NCVO to collect the data that underpins the UK Civil Society Almanac. Indeed, for the last eight years the almanac would not have happened without our joint efforts: TSRC designed the sampling strategy that is used to capture the accounts data from a representative sample of 10,000 charities. This has enabled high-quality data to be captured economically. The data are also used by the Office for National Statistics to quantify the non-profit sector's contribution to the national accounts.<sup>8</sup>

## THE THIRD SECTOR KNOWLEDGE PORTAL

Since we were established, we have been aware of the need to make evidence on the sector available, particularly to non-academics who do not have access to university resources. A lot of information, such as reports from individual organisations, is not easy to find.

A Big Lottery Fund grant enabled us to address this by working with the British Library and others to set up the Third Sector Knowledge Portal, an online repository of references to research findings. It contained about 7,000 items and was accessed by up to 25,000 people a year. Although it was widely used, we were unable to maintain it beyond its first three years of funding. We still think there's a need for this sort of evidence base: the volume of research continues to expand yet findings are published in so many different locations it is extremely difficult to keep track.



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**THE WORK THE TSRC HAS DONE HAS BEEN INVALUABLE. IT MINES DOWN BEYOND THE GENERALITIES TO LOOK AT SPECIFIC SUBSECTORS.**  
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Caroline Slocock, Civil Exchange

## SUPPORTING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ACADEMIC JOURNAL

Before 2010 there was no specialist academic outlet for the expanding body of UK third sector research. The Voluntary Sector Studies Network, the main UK research group, had been working towards publishing a journal and finally achieved its goal in 2010 when Policy Press launched *Voluntary Sector Review*. We contributed to the establishment of the journal by providing

a contribution to the funding to get it off the ground and to support editorial assistance. But our main contribution has been the time of many TSRC academic staff: we've supplied members of the journal's board and staff have also served as editor, book reviews editor and chair of the editorial board. In addition, we are working with Policy Press on a series of books to showcase research in this field – three books based on our work have been published and several others are in preparation from other researchers.<sup>9</sup>



# KEY RESEARCH THEMES





# THEORY AND POLICY: IMPROVING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE THIRD SECTOR AND OF POLICY TOWARDS IT

There is considerable debate about what the third sector is and how it should be defined. The TSRC has contributed significantly to this debate by publishing widely quoted work about the concept of the third sector and the meaning and use of language relating to it by policy-makers, academics and practitioners. Alcock argued that the third sector was no more – and no less – than a ‘strategic unity’. He meant that third sector organisations and sector umbrella bodies came together for tactical and political reasons, simultaneously promoting the idea of the distinctiveness of individual organisations and sub-sectors while minimising their differences when engaged in policy discussions. This view suggests that the idea of a third sector is a product of its time and place that is created and sustained by strategic interests.<sup>10</sup>

Closely related to this is our work on what makes the third sector ‘distinctive’ as compared to businesses or public sector organisations. There are two elements to this. The first considers the nature of the differences

space in which to operate. The sector is made up of hundreds of thousands of like-minded organisations all asserting they are distinctive. This is highlighted in the tactics they use to differentiate themselves from others to gain a hearing in policy debates or to secure resources. Therefore asserting distinctiveness is an important practical strategy of individual organisations and their representative (infrastructure) organisations.<sup>11</sup>

Our work has also considered normative questions about how things ought to be for the third sector. We have identified two strong narratives, which we argue are competing for supremacy. The first narrative is about necessity and transition, and argues that third sector organisations are being encouraged to adapt to new challenges by becoming more businesslike, efficient and impact-focussed. In other words, adapt or die. The second narrative is about jeopardy and loss, and contends that organisations are losing their distinctive original purposes as informal associations and selling out to pressures to

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**YOUR OPENING PRESENTATION [TO A CIVIL SOCIETY FUTURES INQUIRY HEARING] WAS BRILLIANTLY PITCHED TO INFORM, SHAPE AND PROVOKE THINKING ACROSS THE AFTERNOON, BUT ALSO MUCH MORE WIDELY. IT'S CERTAINLY A RESOURCE I WILL REFER BACK TO MANY TIMES AND I AM SURE THAT EVERYONE ELSE WHO CAME WILL TOO.**

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**(comment from Chair of ‘Civil Society Futures: A conversation for Birmingham’, December 2017)**

between third sector organisations and private and public sector organisations – in terms of their organisational characteristics and their impacts on society. Our work shows that even sustaining the claim that the third sector has specific impacts is not straightforward because those impacts are not always clear-cut. The second element considers the ways groups within the sector use ‘distinctiveness’ to create

collaborate with the state and to generate income through contracts and fees. We argue that both these arguments share common features – principally, they imply organisations are primarily products of a changing environment over which they have little control. This underplays the scope they still have to act independently, which is something we explore in our substantive work programmes.

## OUR WORK IN THESE AREAS INCLUDES:

- Consideration of the nature of policy towards the third sector, including devolution, the Europeanisation of third sector policy and the differences in policy towards the sector in UK and Europe and the idea of creating a ‘decontested space’ for policy and practice, in which the appearance of a strategic unity can be maintained.<sup>12</sup>
- Understanding the nature of leadership in the sector – who provides leadership, whom they speak for, their networks of influence and the dilemmas faced by leaders in a hostile environment, particularly around independence.<sup>13</sup>

## THIS HAS LED TO FURTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT:

- The role of key organisations, such as the Big Lottery Fund, in influencing the sector’s development. We worked closely with the BLF to identify its distinctive nature as a policy actor and how it might develop.<sup>14</sup>
- The nature of capacity-building and infrastructure in the sector, especially the implications of the recent change from supply-led capacity-building (boosting the capacity of infrastructure bodies by targeted investment) to demand-led programmes (providing individual organisations with the capacity to choose where they might purchase support).<sup>15</sup>
- Organisations’ perceptions of their operating environment. For example, as part of a European comparative study of the impact of the third sector<sup>16</sup> we looked at the extent to which organisations had found changes in the post-2010 policy environment to be conducive to organisational development.<sup>17</sup>

# VOLUNTEERING: A STUBBORNLY STATIC CIVIC CORE?



Successive governments have sought to increase volunteering using various policy instruments. But how successful have they been? Our studies indicate levels of volunteering have remained relatively static and that although a majority of the population do engage in some form of volunteering during their lives, it is mostly undertaken by a small, select minority which is not representative of the population.

Surveys suggest that nothing much has changed in the 15 years since the government's Citizenship Survey and its successor, the Community Life Survey, have been tracking behaviour. Contrary to government ambitions volunteering rates have remained stubbornly static. However, it's worth adding that survey methods vary, which can affect estimates of participation<sup>18</sup> – but, once we take variations in measurement into account, we are confident in stating that there is no real detectable change since the early 1980s.

Debate about volunteering – characterised by the International Labour Organisation as an 'essential renewable resource for social development' – often emphasises the proportion of the population engaged in various actions. But we show that a fixation with a headline figure can miss three other important points.

Firstly, people move into and out of engagement at different points in their lives. The world-leading British Household Panel Study (BHPS) highlighted this when it asked its panel of 10,000 respondents, who are

surveyed every year, about their experiences of unpaid voluntary work between 1996–2008. The proportion engaged in any one year was about 20% but the proportion engaged in volunteering at least once in that time period was nearly twice that.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, people volunteer in different ways. Some do so formally through organisations; others do it informally in their communities, and they may also be giving money to charity. The proportion who are definitively not engaged in any of these activities is very small – about 10% – and lifelong non-engagement is the preserve of a very small minority indeed.<sup>20</sup> Thirdly, a lot of effort is contributed by a small proportion of the population, which we have called the civic core. Around 30% of the population account for 80% to 90% of volunteering and charitable giving; they tend to be middle-aged and middle-class, and live in the most prosperous parts of the country. This paper has been widely quoted in the voluntary sector, Parliament and elsewhere.<sup>21</sup>

It's often said people don't join voluntary associations as much as they used to and our contribution to this debate suggests this is true – members of post-war birth cohorts are much less likely to be members of associations than earlier birth cohorts.<sup>22</sup> Our qualitative work also suggests economic circumstances are key to engaging people – Rose Lindsey and John Mohan followed a number of volunteers who wrote for Mass Observation, the social research charity, from the 1980s onwards.



They strongly emphasised the importance of job and family in becoming engaged in volunteering.<sup>23</sup> This, along with studies of attitudes to volunteering, highlights how volunteering initiatives need to work with the grain of people's lives, and give them positive reasons to engage.<sup>24</sup>

We have also found evidence that the optimism about a demographic dividend from the baby boomers may need to be tempered. We think that people considering retirement don't necessarily prioritise volunteering as much as they do other things. It is also true that while high proportions of the elderly do volunteer, there is much greater variability in the degree of their involvement as they get older.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, we have also questioned some of the impacts of volunteering. In relation to employability, for example, the evidence is complex and ambiguous; for mental well-being, there are some positive effects, but they are inconsistent from person to person; for civic engagement, the small positive effects of volunteering on engagement in politics are outweighed by the effects of individuals' socioeconomic circumstances.<sup>26</sup>

Our research has therefore provided qualitative insights into the complexities of volunteering and highlighted how participation changes over time and varies according to setting. It has also revealed what enables and limits participation, which can be applied by policymakers, practitioners and other research users.



# GEOGRAPHY: JUST DESERTS?

There has been a lot of discussion in recent years about variations in the distribution of the voluntary sector between places. Several commentators, notably the Centre for Social Justice, have pointed to this issue but the discussion is often reduced to simplistic soundbites about charity deserts, hotspots, or cold spots. This oversimplifies a complex situation.

Our work contributes to the debate by providing authoritative evidence of the distribution of third sector organisations, and by framing discussions about what might be done to support the sector. For example, it may be unrealistic to attempt to close the gap because historical evidence suggests these gaps are persistent. Remember that deserts result from long-term climatic change. Instead it may be better to think about what support can be offered to organisations working in areas where there is a low organisational presence.

Our findings raise questions over whether it is realistic for policymakers to expect gaps in the amount of voluntary activity between communities to be closed. No single funder has the resources to do this and in recent years public funding has been reduced. Perhaps there is a greater need for targeted investment in specific areas instead. There is some discussion of the idea of place-based funding schemes at present – but it will be very difficult for these initiatives to do much about the existing distribution of organisations in the third sector.

OUR ANALYSES INFLUENCED  
THE ALLOCATION OF A

**£100  
MILLION**

**'TRANSITION FUND'  
TO SELECTED  
ORGANISATIONS**



## OUR RESEARCH HAS FOUND:

- There is some substance to the idea of charity deserts because there are many more charities in the most prosperous parts of the country. But just looking at a single index (like the ratio of charities to population) doesn't tell you everything you need to know. For example, there are fewer charities per head of the population in urban areas but they tend to be larger ones in financial terms.<sup>27</sup>
- The geographical scale at which organisations work needs to be considered. The data suggests there are approximately three times as many organisations operating at neighbourhood level in the most prosperous areas as there are in the most disadvantaged ones.<sup>28</sup>
- The funding mix varies between geographical areas. There is far greater reliance on public funding in disadvantaged areas, although this may be changing. We demonstrated this in analyses for the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, which were widely quoted in Parliament and influenced the allocation of a £100 million 'transition fund' to selected organisations.<sup>29</sup>
- There are strong variations in social capital, which are closely related to disadvantage. We argue that efforts to create social capital (eg, through local investments in the voluntary sector) are unlikely to compensate for significant wealth inequalities between places.<sup>30</sup>
- The distribution of voluntary organisations is stable. We recently undertook work linking Charity Commission data over a 40-year period to English and Welsh local authorities. There was a strong negative association between the distribution and levels of disadvantage at the start of the time period and the association is stronger now.<sup>31</sup>
- We have worked with NCVO on studies supported by regional funders and voluntary sector infrastructure bodies on regional studies of the sector, considering what was distinctive about organisations in different parts of the country.<sup>32</sup>
- We find evidence that the distribution of organisations does have an influence on elements of well-being. A recent paper suggests that the distribution of local charities (not those operating regionally or at a larger scale) has a small positive effect on the likelihood of people volunteering.<sup>33</sup>



## LONGITUDINAL CHANGE IN THE SECTOR: CLIFF EDGE OR UNSETTLEMENT?

Change has been the dominant narrative in the voluntary sector recently. Most of this narrative has been pessimistic and focused on uncertainty. But our extensive work programmes on organisational dynamics show there has actually been significant continuity and stability in the sector, as well as change. Sharing the findings will hopefully help to shift the debate to one that focuses on the resilience as well as the fragility of the sector.

When we look at organisations, researchers have used our databases to show that charities in the most disadvantaged places have been least likely to survive recession and austerity; nevertheless, most organisations, most of the time, are still operating.<sup>34</sup> A longitudinal approach shows that organisations in the most disadvantaged places are most likely to be suffering from the financial impact of recession.<sup>35</sup> We have also questioned the commonly-held assumption that large charities are growing at the expense of small organisations.<sup>36</sup>

Besides these large-scale quantitative pieces of work, we have also investigated the impact of change on individual organisations through a programme of work which has been running for nearly ten years now – initially using 15 case study organisations which we visited on several occasions each year. Currently we have a narrower focus on four selected organisations which we are following through to 2020.

The findings have challenged some widely held assumptions about the impact of austerity on the sector, particularly the dominant narrative of a sector in crisis. This narrative often includes phrases such as a 'perfect storm' of conditions that has left many charities on 'a cliff edge'. But our work also investigates the diverse strategies that organisations have adopted in order to survive in the rapidly changing environment by a combination of short-term measures and more substantial organisational changes. We have characterised the period as an 'unsettled environment', to describe the state of perpetual uncertainty in which many third sector organisations operate, rather than one of perpetual crisis.<sup>37</sup>

Historical research has recently come to play a more prominent part in our activities. One project looks at the long-term survival and adaptation of voluntary organisations, focussing principally on communities known to have been studied in the 1940s and 1950s; there is an emphasis on the range of routes through which organisations have evolved and through which they have survived, but we are also interested in the meanings that voluntary action has had to people living in the communities in question.<sup>38</sup>

We are also partners in another project, Discourses of Voluntary Action, which contrasts accounts of the role of the voluntary sector, and the policy positions taken by

various stakeholders and organisations, in the immediate post-war years and in the present day. A good deal of historical narrative about the voluntary sector and welfare has suggested that after the 1940s voluntary action went into retreat or decline but the findings so far indicate that many groups remained active and shaped the development of the welfare state.

This project has also enabled those organisations involved to compare what they were doing then and now, and to reflect on their founding principles and what they exist to do.<sup>39</sup>

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**THE TSRC'S LONGITUDINAL STUDIES ARE OF ENORMOUS VALUE BECAUSE THE WORLD IS CHANGING FAST. THEY ENABLE US TO REFLECT ON LONG-TERM CHANGE AND VALIDATE THE EXPERIENCE OF CHARITIES.**  
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**Lindsay Poole**  
**Advice Services Alliance**

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# THIRD SECTOR ORGANISATIONS DELIVERING PUBLIC SERVICES

Public service delivery has been a major strand of the TSRC's work. Our involvement began with a series of papers that set the agenda for research into key themes – cross-sector partnership working, commissioning of services and payment by results – that continue to be relevant today in debate about the third sector's role in public services.<sup>40</sup>

Much of our work has been informed by theoretical debates in organisational studies and public administration and we have deliberately published papers that address those wider debates, noting, for example, the impact of isomorphic pressures (under which

programme, which aimed to involve more charities in rehabilitating offenders as part of wider reforms to probation services.

The resulting report was widely used and quoted by the Ministry of Justice, the National Audit Office and Parliamentary committees, with the Public Accounts Committee pointing to some common themes of our research: while governments have ostensibly encouraged third sector service provision, commissioning processes were not facilitating the involvement of voluntary organisations, for whom the experience of being involved in the programme was a negative one. The Committee

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**LOCAL VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS HAVE NEVER HAD MUCH RESEARCH CAPACITY ....SO THE ARRIVAL OF THE TSRC WAS WELCOMED BY NAVCA AND ITS LOCAL MEMBERS. AT LAST WE COULD COMPETE FOR STATE RESOURCES MORE EQUALLY WITH BIG CHARITIES AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR BY PROVIDING COMMISSIONERS WITH THE EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS THEY DEMANDED. ALWAYS ACCESSIBLE AND RESPONSIVE, I'M PLEASED TO CELEBRATE TSRC'S ANNIVERSARY.**

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**Kevin Curley, former CEO, NAVCA**

third sector organisations mimic the behaviours and structures of their commercial competitors) driving standardisation of provision.<sup>41</sup>

An early TSRC project in this field focused on the involvement of third sector organisations in delivering criminal justice services.<sup>42</sup> The TSRC's experience in longitudinal research, working with stakeholders over a number of years, led to collaboration between Clinks, the NCVO and the TSRC. This project tracked the involvement of third sector organisations in the government's Transforming Rehabilitation

recommended, and the Government accepted, that more needed to be done to deliver on the Government's stated commitment to a diverse market for service provision in this field and to facilitate the involvement of smaller third sector organisations.<sup>43</sup> A major organisation involved in the field stated that 'we thought that it was really helpful to have an organisation like TSRC providing comment on the voluntary sector... that we can point to and say here is an independent organisation doing rigorous research on the voluntary sector in our part of the system and here is the learning from it.'



Similar findings emerged from TSRC's investigations of the government's Work Programme, which aimed to involve more third sector organisations in welfare-to-work schemes. Our research demonstrated how some of the optimistic expectations about the sector's level of involvement have not materialised because the new commercial environment created by the commissioning of prime contractors led to market-based competition and cost reduction. However, our research also showed the diverse approaches sector organisations have adopted to the challenges of delivering services despite increased austerity.<sup>44</sup> These findings were echoed in research into the commissioning of mental health services: many voluntary organisations felt excluded in the commissioning cycle and that they lost out in competitive processes.<sup>45</sup>

Public service delivery continues to be a major strand of our work. We were recently funded by the National Institute for Health Research to study the role of the voluntary sector in mental health care provision, and will complete a substantial report on this in 2019.<sup>46</sup> We also recently completed a project on voluntary action in community hospitals, which has many lessons for contemporary discussions about the role that volunteers might play in public services.<sup>47</sup>



# GETTING BELOW THE RADAR: UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

TSRC's below the radar work was informed by recognition that informal community groups were the least researched – and understood – part of the third sector. Sometimes referred to as the 'dark matter' of the third sector, these are also more commonly described as 'below radar' because they do not become visible through formal processes such as registration as a company or charity. Strong input from honorary, volunteer and practitioner researchers has helped shape a diverse programme of activities.

We have produced over 30 working and discussion papers on a wide range of topics and themes. They include methodological papers on how to research informal action and explorations of the lived realities of community action – from work with refugees and asylum seekers to rural community organising; from the role of emotion in activism and community arts though to the role of social media in grass roots organising. We have worked with a diverse range of groups including BME community organisations, groups supporting the Gypsy, Roma and traveller communities, and

continuity in community action.<sup>48</sup> We have also published a book, *Community groups in context*, which draws together a wide range of contributions from TSRC staff and associates.<sup>49</sup>

We've raised questions that challenge underlying assumptions held by policymakers and parts of the formal voluntary sector about small-scale community activity, such as:

- The assumption that communities, and community action, are based on geography. We argue that localism, and the current emphasis on place-based initiatives, ignores the rich diversity of actions based not on neighbourhoods but on a sense of identity as well as communities of interest and belief.
- Grassroots groups do not 'fail', nor are they amateurish, if they do not 'scale up' (to use the jargon) or formalise. It is sometimes said voluntary organisations should aspire to get bigger. But one of the most important characteristics of grassroots groups is that they wish to remain active on a human scale and grounded in their particular community.

resources to support people by tapping into local social networks.

- The spaces for community action are important. One of the consequences of austerity has been the closure of spaces which provide an infrastructure in which groups can come together. While below-radar activities by definition do not involve large amounts of funding, it is crucial that they are sustained. The provision of physical spaces for meetings and activities is important.

Our work in this area has been recognised by being commissioned to contribute to the evaluation of Big Local, a Big Lottery Fund initiative managed by Local Trust. The project website, Our Bigger Story, presents multimedia work we are leading which documents resident-led change over a time period which will potentially run for ten years.<sup>50</sup>

Our research constitutes probably the most significant body of work providing a picture of this often-overlooked part of the voluntary



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**WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR TENS OF THOUSANDS OF VOLUNTARY SECTOR ARTS ORGANISATIONS THAT OFTEN GO IGNORED... TSRC'S FOCUS ON BELOW-THE-RADAR, SMALL COMMUNITY GROUPS IS VALUABLE. SMALL ORGANISATIONS ARE DIFFICULT TO RESEARCH BUT TSRC HAS BEEN DOING IT FOR YEARS AND LONG MAY IT CONTINUE.**

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**Robin Simpson, Chief Executive, Voluntary Arts**

grassroots organisations. Significant work has also been done on faith-based organisations, showing how grassroots groups use the infrastructure and networks of faith-based organisations to respond to frontline social needs. Our research is summarised in 'Ten Years Below the radar', which contains 15 reflections on a decade of change and

- There is not an infinite pool of community activists. Sustaining activism, in the face of austerity and rising levels of in-work poverty, is hard. It takes courage just to keep going – never mind address the big policy issues, such as integration and wellbeing. It also takes creativity – and below-radar groups are often experts at pulling together

sector, demonstrating its importance, and providing insights into how its vital work might be supported. It illuminates the perseverance and persistence of activists and community groups, often struggling, in their attempts to respond to austerity and destitution, with adverse media coverage and hostile public perceptions of marginalised groups.

# QUESTIONING THE GROWTH OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

Social enterprise has been a buzz phrase in the third sector for more than a decade. Commentators frequently talk about its growth and potential. Our research has questioned these assumptions by identifying challenges in defining and mapping social enterprises,<sup>51</sup> and by questioning the extent of growth. The findings, as with other areas of our activity, have laid the groundwork for future research.

We evaluated the data sources and tools used to construct official statistics and found that what looked like 'growth' was mainly attributable to political decisions surrounding measurement; the meanings of social enterprise evolved and expanded as actors adopted the term in order to compete for funding.<sup>52</sup> We also explored social enterprise discourse in UK policy and found that rather than being a new phenomenon, social enterprise is actually a repackaging of existing phenomena under neoliberal governance. In other words, governments have sought to minimise the harsh social effects of their policies by arguing that new forms of social

sources. Their defining characteristic is their dual pursuit of financial sustainability and social purpose.<sup>55</sup> This work has also been used in the development of learning materials for a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on social enterprise.<sup>56</sup>

A good deal of academic and policy literature presents the expansion of social enterprise as a 'win-win' because social enterprises can pursue profit-maximising behaviour while simultaneously maximising social benefits. However, social enterprises inevitably face a trade-off between social and commercial considerations. This poses challenges for organisations and we have shown how some work integration social enterprises in the

Some influential commentators regard social enterprises as vehicles for enabling a transition towards associative democracy. But our analysis of the legal and regulatory forms that exist within the social economy in England indicates that current frameworks will not easily facilitate such a transition. The analysis opens up challenging questions on how to regulate and support the democratic element of associative democracy.<sup>58</sup>

The discourses of social enterprise can sometimes appear forceful and engaging, but not all organisations identify with the drive to transform third sector organisations into economic agents. Our work shows how some organisations positively embrace an identity as a social enterprise while others seem to refuse being labelled as such.<sup>59</sup> Indeed some individuals engage in what has been termed 'tactical mimicry' – acting in public arenas as social entrepreneurs to gain access to financial resources, while utilising those resources in an alternative way consistent with meeting their social objectives. Where such 'mimicry' conforms to governmental strategies only in order to exploit them, its ultimate aim is to increase the potential for collective agency outside the direct influence of power.<sup>60</sup> TSRC's work on social enterprise continues to influence research in the field. One of our former colleagues has been part of a major project about the contribution that social enterprise can make to reducing health inequalities while another is contributing a social enterprise dimension to a long-term programme of work on sustainable prosperity, focussing especially on environmental social enterprises.<sup>61</sup>

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**TSRC HAS CREATED A NETWORK OF ACADEMICS WITH STRONG ROOTS IN PRACTICE. IF I HAD TO HIGHLIGHT ONE THING IT WOULD BE THAT ITS LONGITUDINAL WORK GIVES US UNIQUE INFORMATION. IN A SECTOR DOMINATED BY SHORT-TERM FUNDING IT'S UNUSUAL TO HAVE A PIECE OF WORK THAT SPANS TEN YEARS.**

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**Debbie Pippard, Director of Programmes, Barrow Cadbury Trust**

organisation are coming to the rescue.<sup>53</sup> We also showed how the meanings of social enterprise have evolved and expanded over time as various organisations adopt the term to compete for financial resources.<sup>54</sup> However, if there is one defining feature of social enterprises it is hybridity: they draw resources from a mix of public, commercial and voluntary

homelessness field struggled to balance their mission goals with financial sustainability. They were able to compete with mainstream businesses – but only by transferring the (social) costs of their activities to consumers, government, philanthropic donors and other organisations that provide social support to homeless people.<sup>57</sup>



# ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE THIRD SECTOR



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**... WE WERE UNDER PRESSURE TO MEASURE IMPACT BUT WE COULD ONLY USE IT [SROI] BECAUSE WE BOUGHT IN HELP. IT WAS COSTLY AND NOT SUSTAINABLE BUT THE [TSRC] RESEARCH SHOWED THERE WERE OTHER WAYS... AND IT WAS OK TO PICK AND MIX THE TOOLS.**

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**(charity working with TSRC on projects designed to improve understanding of impact assessment)**

Few issues have stimulated more third sector debate recently than impact. Voluntary organisations are increasingly expected to be able to demonstrate the value of their work, particularly if they receive public funding. Some organisations and their stakeholders make great claims, but how accurate are they? The TSRC has studied the robustness of methods used to measure impact, considered how third sector organisations have been affected by the demand for greater evaluation and made recommendations for improvements that have been acted on.

Defining impact is difficult – what may count as impact for one organisation may not be relevant to another. A comprehensive review conducted as part of a comparative European project raised important questions about the methods used to assess impact.<sup>62</sup> Some impacts are direct (eg, services delivered) while others are indirect or latent (eg, the argument that volunteering produces social capital). Also, it is difficult to separate the effects of activities carried out by third sector organisations for two reasons: firstly, individuals are not randomly allocated to one organisation or another, as they might be in a medical trial; secondly, gathering evidence to identify a distinctive contribution can be extremely difficult.

Our work therefore focused on critiques of methods used to measure impact and researching how organisations approach it.

Social Return on Investment (SROI) methods have been popular because of their emphasis on the social value created by organisations. They aim to attribute financial value to inputs and outcomes but this is a complex process which involves many assumptions and judgements. Many indicators are not robust enough to support such calculations, which suggests caution in the way SROI is used. However, our work takes the view that although this form of measurement, which is arguably imposed from the outside, may not give accurate results voluntary organisations can still use it for learning and promotional purposes.<sup>63</sup> We have developed a critique of SROI, showing that while fashionable, there is tension between the participatory element in the design of each SROI exercise and its use for the purpose of competition and acquisition of resources. This casts doubt on the suitability of SROI as a means of comparing the value created by different organisations.

One of the main challenges facing social enterprises is demonstrating their distinctive impact. A considerable amount of TSRC research has looked into the process of how they measure it and what motivates third sector organisations to evaluate it. We found that while many funders push third sector organisations to evaluate their impact, in some cases the funded organisation has been able to subvert this power relationship by deciding what and how to measure and / or report.<sup>64</sup>

When investigating how such techniques have been used in practice we have discovered varying degrees of acceptance and resistance.<sup>65</sup> We argued that the results of evaluation research and the methods used to assess impacts often depend on the judgements of those with most power in the system. This led us to argue that evaluators might adopt a ‘values-engaged’ approach, which places social value at the centre of commissioning, and that they could adopt participatory and communicative methods in conjunction with other evaluation methods to engage hard-to-reach groups more fully.<sup>66</sup>

The demand to measure impact also creates a tension because although it can promote transparency and trust, it also leads to competition among service providers. This poses challenges for organisations and there is work to be done on how they are able to manage the requirements and opportunities of commissioning public services in a more marketised environment.<sup>67</sup>

TSRC researchers are continuing to work on this and we have recently published a systematic review of factors that support or prevent evaluation by TSOs. The key issues revolve around a lack of support, resources and clarity on the appropriate outcome indicators. The review recommends applying evidence-based strategies that include stakeholders to develop shared evaluation requirements.<sup>68</sup>





# **DISTINCTIVE CONTRIBUTION AND IMPACT OF TSRC**

We hope the foregoing has given a sense of the academic contributions that TSRC and its staff and students have made, and are continuing to make, to academic research in this field. But whether a research initiative such as this continues to develop depends on our broader impacts on policy and practice, on the development of the careers of new scholars to take forward the research agenda, and on responding to the challenges faced by the third sector and its stakeholders.

Thus we conclude by looking both at some of TSRC's impacts to date, both in terms of the different ways in which our research has influenced policy and practice, and in terms of supporting the careers of new researchers. We then reflect on key themes likely to engage researchers, policymakers and practitioners in this field in the coming years.

# IMPACTS ON POLICY AND PUBLIC DEBATE

TSRC exists to provide an independent perspective on developments in the third sector. Thus while the centre has worked closely with individual organisations it does not mean that we will agree with them on everything.

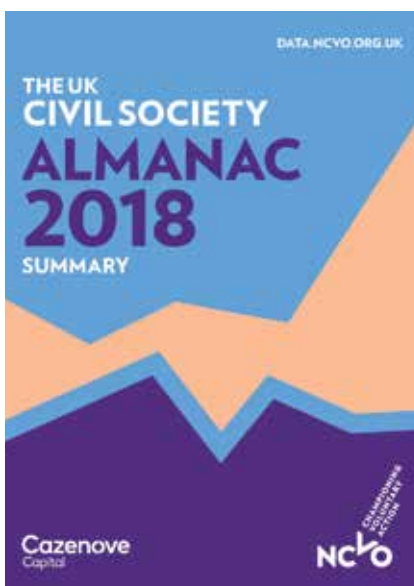
## THE WAYS IN WHICH WE SEEK TO INTERVENE IN PUBLIC DEBATE INCLUDE:

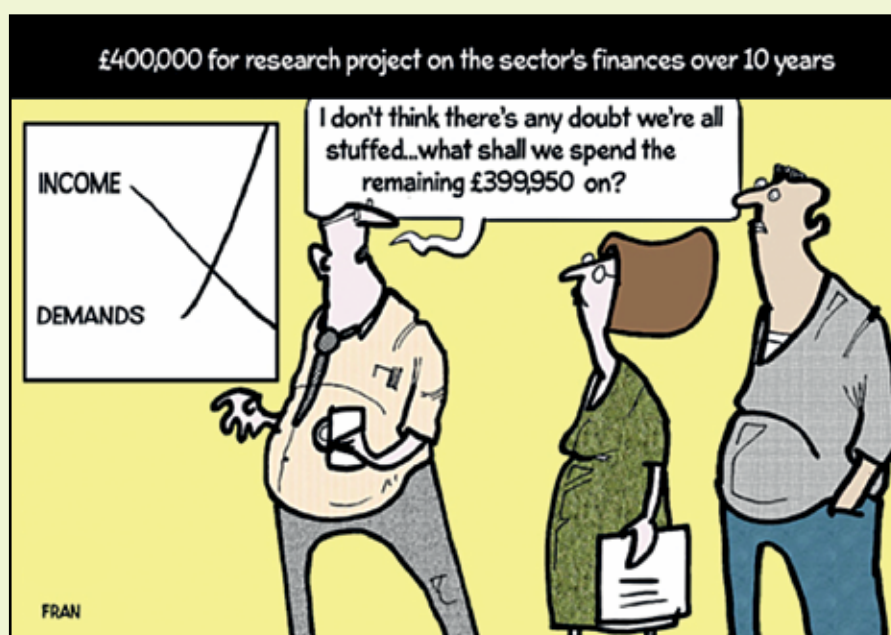
- **Conceptual work that seeks to reframe debates** – such as the idea of a ‘civic core’ of volunteers, a deceptively simple idea which appears to have resonated widely with practitioners.
- **High-level analyses of complex subjects** – such as sophisticated quantitative work on the impacts of voluntary action, or on high salaries in the charity sector,<sup>89</sup> where one stakeholder commented that ‘The sector was vulnerable to top pay critics... before TSRC’s analysis it did not have the ability to counter criticism’.
- **Practical, process-oriented interventions**, such as the ways we work collaboratively with individual organisations. Our work on social impact assessment, for example, involved developing an online guide to improving practice in the use of social return on investment methods, extensive training courses attended by hundreds of organisations, and working with selected individual organisations to help develop their own methods for impact assessment.
- **Instrumental interventions**, designed to affect policy decisions or the practices of organisations, such as our work with NCVO on the finances of charities, which directly influences the evidence base for the sector and is used by many organisations in developing their strategies.

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**THE TSRC EVIDENCE [ON CHARITY CHIEF EXECUTIVE PAY] MASSIVELY CONTRIBUTED TO A PUBLIC INTEREST ISSUE. IT ENABLED US TO ENGAGE WITH THE MEDIA, CONFIDENTLY, WITH AUTHORITY ... AND TO GO BEYOND ‘YOU WOULD SAY THAT WOULDN’T YOU’ SCEPTICISM.**

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### THERE ARE EXAMPLES OF OUR WORK IN A NUMBER OF CONTEXTS:

- **Government policy decisions** – our analysis of the exposure of third sector organisations to public sector funding streams was acknowledged by Ministers as directly influencing the announcement of a £100 million voluntary sector 'transition fund' in the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review;<sup>70</sup>
- **Parliament** – regularly submitting evidence to inquiries, being called to give oral testimony, and being quoted by MPs in debates;<sup>71,72</sup>
- Given the policy salience of our work on voluntarism and voluntary organisations, **we have featured on Radio 4** on a number of occasions, including two appearances on *Thinking Allowed*, interviews on *Analysis*, *You and Yours* and the *World at One*, and our work being quoted in questions to the Prime Minister during the Conservative Party 2011 conference. Perhaps the most unusual of these was a Radio 4 documentary on the history of philanthropy, which was 'played in' by a recording of our Director, John Mohan, on the piano at Cumberland Lodge.<sup>73</sup>
- **Inquiries into the sector** – we are regularly asked to contribute evidence to these; for example, the recent (2018) Civil Society Futures inquiry reports used our findings very extensively.<sup>74</sup>
- **Being invited to play advisory roles in such inquiries and / or to provide advice to individual organisations** – such as the NAVCA Commission on Infrastructure, or the Empowered Communities in the 2020s inquiry.<sup>75</sup>
- **Public debate.** An illustration is our civic core work. Our analysis of a 'civic core' raises questions about policies to raise levels of volunteering since it draws attention to the amount of effort citizens contribute as well as to the proportion of citizens who engage in pro-social behaviours. Originally presented at seminars in 2010 and reported by the *Guardian*, it generated an interview on *Thinking Allowed*, together with postings / reports by bloggers, thinktanks, and sector bodies. It has been cited by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Institute for Volunteering Research, and the RSA, quoted in Parliament, and referred to in Niall Ferguson's book based on his Reith

Lectures. The think tank, ResPublica, used the figures as the starting-point for a report which suggested we need to double the size of the core.

- **Policy briefings and dialogues** with key stakeholders, as illustrated by our work with the Big Lottery Fund and other significant funders, and also with central and local government.

Of course there are occasions when stakeholders will disagree with our findings. But one unusual accolade for our work came from the journal, *Third Sector*, in response to an announcement of funding of £400 000 for our work with NCVO. The cartoon suggests one perspective on the value of academic research: it is self-evident that voluntary sector funding is in a state of permanent crisis, so why is further research necessary? We hope this is somewhat tongue-in-cheek – and indeed the widespread use of the products of that particular collaboration (with tens of thousands of people engaging with the NCVO Almanac website in any one year) suggests that the work is valued.



# INVESTING IN THE FUTURE: DEVELOPING EARLY-CAREER RESEARCHERS IN TSRC

A key rationale for long-term investments such as the one which created TSRC is that by investing in research posts for people at the start of their career, there is a longer-term impact in building up research capacity. More than 20 of our former research staff and students have gone on to take up academic appointments in British and overseas universities. We are also proud that a number of former PhD students and staff have been appointed to research and policy roles in major voluntary organisations.

Examples include positions as directors of research or policy at the Church Urban Fund, Scope and the National Development Team for Inclusion; policy roles at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Charity Finance Group; and chief executive positions at Volunteering New Zealand and the Kent Refugee Action Network.

A number of researchers and early-career academic staff have obtained funding or other research recognition – a direct example of capacity-building through our activities. Examples include:

- An ESRC Future Research Leaders award 2013 to David Clifford.<sup>76</sup> These awards recognise a small number of individuals from social science backgrounds who have completed their PhD within the last four years. David's research explored new data from the Charity Commission regarding the overseas activities of English and Welsh charities.
- Three awards to early career academics from ESRC to support a collaboration between ourselves and the social research charity, Mass Observation,<sup>77</sup> for projects on long-run change in voluntary action. The first, in 2013–14, was awarded to Rose Lindsey and Sarah Bulloch for a study which generated a major monograph *Continuity and change in voluntary action*.<sup>78</sup> A second award developed the use of Mass Observation as a research resource by producing an online version of Mass Observation's database of volunteer writers, whose contributions are a major resource

for social scientists and historians.<sup>79</sup> The third project is Discourses of Voluntary Action<sup>80</sup>, a project from 2017–19 that involved Rob Macmillan and Angela Ellis Paine and various collaborators that investigated the debates that have taken place on the role, position and contribution of voluntary action in the provision of welfare in the 1940s and 2010s. This project will contribute to new understandings of voluntary action and inform practical action for third sector organisations and policymakers.<sup>81</sup>

- Involvement in a major Medical Research Council-funded project on 'Social enterprise as a public health intervention',<sup>82</sup> by Simon Teasdale, a TSRC researcher from 2008–13 who now holds a chair at Glasgow Caledonian University.
- Other significant research projects in which our early-career staff have played central roles include an extension from the ESRC of our longitudinal work, which has tracked a small number of third sector organisations since 2009, involving Rob Macmillan and Angela Ellis Paine; a National Institute for Health Research project (2016–19) on the role of the voluntary sector in mental health crisis care involving James Rees,<sup>83</sup> a former research fellow at the TSRC who is now at the Open University; and a project involving Rees and two former ESRC-funded PhD students from TSRC, on the value of small and medium-sized voluntary organisations, funded by the Lloyds Bank Foundation.<sup>84</sup>
- Some former colleagues have won significant prizes or awards in their own right. Thus David Clifford was awarded a prestigious Philip Leverhulme Prize in 2017 to develop his large-scale quantitative work on organisational change in the third sector, using TSRC datasets which he played a significant role in creating. Alice Mills, now at the University of Auckland, received an award from the Marsden Fund, New Zealand in 2017 to support ex-offenders in desistance,<sup>85</sup> which builds on her work with TSRC. Finally, Charlie Rahal, now at the University of Oxford, has a British Academy postdoctoral fellowship to

extend work he did with the TSRC on the ESRC-funded civil society data partnerships projects.<sup>86</sup> Charlie is developing refined procedures for linking together open data on public sector procurement to financial data on third sector organisations.

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**WE WANT TO SEE RESEARCH DATA AVAILABLE AND ACCESSIBLE TO THE THIRD SECTOR. IF THE TSRC CAN CONTINUE TO DO THIS IT WOULD IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE SECTOR AND HELP IT TO DELIVER BETTER SERVICES.**

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**Sharon Palmer (former CEO, Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM))**





# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



TSRC marked its tenth anniversary with a conference in Birmingham in February 2019. The theme we chose was continuity and change in voluntary action, and we deliberately structured it to facilitate discussion about the relevance of our findings to third sector organisations.

An audience of around 100 delegates heard a range of presentations and the very strong and positive evaluations revealed how much our work is valued by stakeholders. The hashtag for the day, **#tsrc10**, gives an insight into the enthusiastic reactions of participants on the day.

## KEY ISSUES TO EMERGE IN DISCUSSION WERE:

- The value of the TSRC's analyses of the 'big picture' context in which the sector operates. These analyses are really important to support strategic thinking by sector leaders and individual organisations. There are several competing narratives of change; some of these place the third sector on the defensive, whereas others offer reasons to be optimistic.
- The importance of coproduction of research, with stakeholders being engaged in the design and delivery of research findings;
- The need to make research findings not only discoverable but accessible – in other words, not merely providing signposting to new findings but also communication of academic messages in a straightforward and action-oriented way;
- The importance of agency: as one discussant put it, organisations may not be able to control the context in which they operate – but they still have scope to control their conduct.
- Diversity and inequality: a concern that the third sector is not always inclusive, nor does it always reach the most disadvantaged, while participation remains heavily stratified;
- The significance of place: there are important concerns about geographical inequalities (for example in the distribution

of third sector organisations) and also about the space for community action (restrictions in public funding leading to the loss of formerly-public spaces). However, we shouldn't overemphasise this; the focus on place might mean a neglect of communities not organised around localities.

- Leadership as an under-researched aspect of the third sector: in a time in which resources are scarce, creative leadership becomes more important, with a focus on developing organisations which have self-awareness, clarity of purpose, and which are continually evolving.
- The challenges of impact measurement, with one plenary speaker arguing that outcome measurement is often funder-driven, rather than being led by organisations themselves, who should ask whether their work is really making the difference they expect it to.

How might TSRC and others take forward the research agenda? There is clear enthusiasm and support for the idea of a research initiative,

such as TSRC, that offers practitioners concepts and evidence which can help them make sense of complex and fast-moving social change. The core emphases of TSRC's work on the roles, resources and relationships of third sector organisations, remain highly relevant. The value of a sector-wide perspective was also acknowledged by participants. It was also acknowledged that there needed to be a sustained effort to develop the evidence base. There is a strong appetite for future collaboration and we intend to build on the momentum generated by the event. There is an emerging generation of academics who have worked in TSRC at formative stages in their own careers and who are now in more established posts. These all provide grounds for optimism. TSRC may evolve into a more dispersed network of researchers and practitioners, but on the evidence of its tenth anniversary event, the future looks positive. Watch this space!

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**TSRC HAS BEEN A FANTASTIC CATALYST FOR RESEARCH ON CIVIL SOCIETY AND VOLUNTEERING OVER THE LAST DECADE. IT IS AS IMPORTANT AS EVER THAT OUR ACADEMIC COLLEAGUES HELP US UNDERSTAND HOW WE ARE CHANGING.**

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**Karl Wilding, National Council for Voluntary Organisations**

# NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Harris, M. (2016) Where did we come from? The emergence and early development of voluntary sector studies in the UK, *Voluntary Sector Review*, 7, 5-26.
- <sup>3</sup> Wolfenden, J. (1978) The future of voluntary organisations: report of the Wolfenden Committee. London: Croom Helm; Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector (1996) *Meeting the challenge of change: voluntary action into the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. London: NCVO.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://esrc.ukri.org/collaboration/opportunities-for-civil-society/>
- <sup>5</sup> Beebeejaun, Y, Durose, C, Rees, J et al (2013) 'Beyond text': exploring ethos and method in co-producing research with communities, *Community Development Journal*, 49, 37-53
- <sup>6</sup> TSRC (2013) Unity in diversity: what is the future for the third sector? Futures Dialogue report, available at <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/tsrc/publications/index.aspx>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/850933/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Changes to national accounting systems which incorporate use of the NCVO-TSRC data are discussed at <https://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2014/05/30/voluntary-sector-in-the-national-accounts/> and also at <https://bit.ly/2G6Nj3X>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/third-sector-research-series?sort=-TitleWithoutPrefix.desc>
- <sup>10</sup> Alcock, P (2010) A strategic unity: defining the third sector in the UK. *Voluntary Sector Review*, 1(1), pp. 5-24
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World at One, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2012, the impact of the London Olympics on volunteering; Analysis, 20<sup>th</sup> October 2013: John Mohan on the changing funding mix of charities; Thinking Allowed, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2016, John Mohan discusses his book, The Logic of Charity. Sadly the episode of the Today Programme where our work was put to David Cameron in a discussion of the Big Society in 2011 has not survived.

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John Mohan



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