

Briefing Paper 29

'Below the radar' activities and organisations in the third sector: a summary review of the literature

Angus McCabe, Dr Jenny Phillimore and Lucy Mayblin, University of Birmingham

Background

The term 'below, or under, the radar' has become a short-hand term often applied to describe small voluntary organisations, community groups and more informal or semi-formal activities in the Third Sector. Interest in such activities (beyond the role of the formal voluntary sector in service delivery) has grown in recent times and cuts across a wide range of current policy concerns: from the engagement of Black and Minority Ethnic community organisations in community cohesion agendas and combating extremism, through to the commissioning of public services at the local level, supporting grass roots community economic development in excluded neighbourhoods as well as the involvement of community based organisations in modernising local governance, community safety and health planning and policy. This interest has coincided with a series of investments in small organisations to develop their capacity to engage in policy and service delivery including, for example, Community Empowerment Networks and Regional Empowerment Partnerships

Aims

The current paper aims to summarise the key findings from a more detailed review of the

literature available on the Third Sector Research Centre website. It addresses:

- the term 'below the radar' and its use in research as a means of defining and understanding community based activity;
- the issues currently faced by small 'below the radar' community groups and activities.

Defining 'below the radar'

The term 'below the radar' tends to be applied either to organisations that do not appear on national datasets or to those groups with limited, or uncertain, incomes.

For example MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) use the term BTR to refer to those groups or activities that are 'unregulated' and do not appear in databases held by the Charity Commission, Companies House, the Registrar of Community Interest Companies, or Guidestar. While it could be argued that this legal or regulatory approach is appropriate for some parts of the sector, for example migrant and refugee organisations (MRCOs) many other often very small operations do register in some way, so that they are able to access funds from grant making trusts.

Some commentators consider that very small registered organisations and activities may operate under a financial, rather than

regulatory, radar. There is no consensus about the threshold of income that leaves activities under the financial radar. NCVO describes charities with incomes of less than £10,000 per annum as 'micro charities' (NCVO, 2009). Alternatively CEFET (2007) use an annual income of £35,000 to define 'grass-roots or street level' organisations Thompson (2008) , identified two funding thresholds; organisations with funding less than £250,000, which are small, relative to the big children's charities; and "smaller" under the radar organisations with income of less than £50,000 per year.

Whilst issues of income and legal status dominate the research literature, there is no 'neat' definition of BTR and recent papers indicate that

*'The phrase under the radar is ungainly, but is the best available terminology for those organisations which are not included in the main national registers.'*¹

'Below the radar' some issues with the literature

The term 'below the radar' may be imperfect, but is now frequently used in policy and practice papers. Its usage in the research literature is much less common and the terminology of 'community groups' or 'small voluntary organisations' is found more frequently. Yet, even when widening any literature review to include the broader range of language used to describe 'the community sector', problems remain.

There is no single or easily accessible repository for information on community organisations and activities. The literature is extremely fragmented and appears (often occasionally) in journals as diverse as those focused on human geography, urban/rural studies, public sector management and psychology (Edwards et al 2000).

¹ OTS (2008) Draft Guidance: National Survey of Third Sector Organisations 'Under the Radar' Pilot

Further, much of the literature remains 'hidden' from public view for example reports of the evaluations of Area Based Initiatives or Urban/Rural Regeneration Programmes that are not easily or publicly accessible.

Even where the literature is accessible, there are key gaps – particularly in the areas of cultural, social and sports groups.

Academic research has tended to focus on particular 'sub-groupings' of the 'community sector' (e.g. housing associations/BME groups). Much less has been written about arts/cultural and sports organisations for example. Further, the research literature focuses on formality and structure, addresses voluntary 'organisation' rather than 'activity'.

Measuring and mapping 'below the radar' activity

Little is therefore known about the exact extent of small voluntary or community or BTR activity. Toepler argues (2003:p.236)

'perhaps one of the few remaining big mysteries in non-profit sector research is the question of what we are missing by excluding those organisations from empirical investigations that are not easily captured in standard data sources'

Systematic research into the voluntary sector is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Quantitative data collection over the last decade has enabled the literature to be much more precise about the number and nature of formal third sector agencies. The number of registered charities, co-operative, community interest companies etc can now be identified with a reasonable degree of accuracy (NCVO, 2009).

Once we broaden the focus to the wider, 'unregulated' sector it becomes far more difficult to make any precise claims about the size of the sector. MacGillivray et al. (2001) argue there are more than 900,000 micro-organisations in the UK. The New Economics Foundation estimate is between 600,000 and 900,000 (cited in NCVO, 2009) and the NCVO estimate some 870,000 'civil society'

organisations; whilst noting that the quality of data on informal community organisations is poor.

Common themes from the literature

'Below the radar' groups, or informal community organisations/activities, therefore constitute a major part of the third sector in terms of numbers – if not financial resources. Yet the roles and functions of such groups are contested in the research. Thus, it has been argued that small third sector organisations exist as alternative providers of goods and services and bring added value in their capacity to innovate and reach particularly marginalised groups (Boateng, 2002). Others argue that very small VCOs may make very little contribution in this sphere where they are driven more by notions of solidarity, mutuality, and voluntary altruism than the provision of professionalized services (Barnes *et al.*, 2006).

Once the literature beyond the 'narrow' term below the radar is broadened out to include what has been referred to as the 'community sector' three common themes appear to be dominant, governance, influence and resources.

1. Governance

A key characteristic of small groups has been seen in the research as informality, often relying on the leadership skills and drive of one key individual (Morgan, 2008, Richardson, 2008).

This has been seen as both a strength, in that such groups can be flexible, responsive and close to their community (Gilchrist, 2004), and a weakness, as such organisations may be un-sustainable, lack vertical and horizontal relationships with other statutory/voluntary organisations (Ockenden and Hutin, 2008), be un-democratic and unaccountable to a wider/user constituency (MacGillivray, *et al.*, 2001) hence an emphasis in community

capacity building initiatives on organisational structure and governance.

Others authors note alternatively that formality may be inappropriate for local voluntary action (Richardson, 2008) or that even small organisations, as they seek funding, will formalise their management to meet charity/company law requirements (Phillimore and Goodson, 2009), though the extent to which such formalisation influences the purpose and functions of small groups is contested (Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005).

2. Influence

References to the importance of small community organisations is an increasingly common theme in the policy literature which, in particular, stresses their role in delivering community cohesion, building social capital and facilitating democratic participation (CLG 2007). There has also been a growing interest within policy agendas on concepts of community leadership and community 'anchor' organisations and investment in 'community capacity building' (Community Alliance, 2009).

The extent to which this activity has impacted upon under the radar voluntary groups is unclear (Harris and Schlappa, 2008). There is clearly a great deal of pressure upon small organisations to deliver many of the outcomes sought by policymakers but the extent to which BTR groups and organisations have been able to benefit from recent policy initiatives or influence policy development is not clear from the existing literature.

However, a number of commentators have noted the lack of representation of BTR activities and organisations in formal policy arenas (Craig *et al.*, 2002, Thompson, 2008) and even when such groups are present there are power differentials that make influencing difficult (McCabe *et al.*, 2007)

3. Finance and access to resources

A final common theme in the literature is the difficulties small/below the radar groups have

in accessing finance (Craig *et al*, 2002). A number of reasons for this have been suggested: small groups may be unaware of funding opportunities (Blackburn *et al*, 2003), or fail to understand funders' priorities and eligibility criteria (Gary *et al*, 2006). With the growth in the third sector as a whole, and increased competition for finite resources, small/informal groups face disadvantages compared to established agencies (CLG, 2009).

Further, it has been suggested that the move to the contracting culture, with invitations to tender and pre-qualifying questionnaires, favour larger voluntary organisations in the procurement process (BVSC, 2009).

This research focus on funding raises a number of important nuances between different below the radar/community groupings. For example, small arts based organisations have been seen as largely self reliant and therefore not seeking external funds (Dodd *et al*, 2008) whereas faith based groups may encounter funder suspicions on the purposes for which monies will be used (Jochum, 2007).

Absences and Issues in the Literature

This focus on 'sub-groupings' (e.g.rural/BME/faith organisations) has resulted in a number of claims regarding the unique features of particular organisations. The BME sector, although this term is seen as contentious, has been viewed, for example as distinctive (Mcleod *et al*, 2001) as has the faith 'sector' (Furbey *et al*, 2006). Rural community groups have been viewed as qualitatively different to their urban counterparts (Abram *et al*, 1996).

The extent to which there are commonalities, or overlaps, between for instance faith based and BME groups remains largely unexplored. This, in turn, raises the issue of other gaps in the literature on below the radar activities and

small community based groups. Little, for instance, appears to have been written on the influences of class or gender in community and voluntary action. Whilst substantial claims are made for the importance of community groups and action (CLG, 2009), research into their impact, how they evolve over time and who becomes active in them is also limited.

There are therefore a number of important, emerging, questions about below the radar activity and small community organisations that have yet to be fully addressed in the research. For example:

- How do these groups manage the tensions between community credibility/needs and growing policy demands?
- How are new migrant groups organising?
- What role is information technology playing in shaping community based organising and action (Smith and McCabe, 2009)?

Conclusions

As noted, there are very limited references to the term 'below the radar' in the research literature. Yet an analysis of the wider literature on small/informal community groups highlights that the largest part of the third sector is the least researched.

The extent to which 'below the radar' is a helpful phrase in developing understandings of grassroots activity and organising is contentious – though there may well be different, non-financial/regulatory aspects of 'the radar' (such as groups underneath policy or local development agency radars) which are worth further exploration in analysing community organisation and, crucially, activity.

Extending that knowledge base is one of the key challenges facing the Third Sector Research Centre as its programme of work evolves.

This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsric.ac.uk for more details and a copy of the full Working Paper 29