

Third Sector Research Centre

Working Paper 135

Shifting the dials? Stability, change and cohort variations in voluntary action

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Abstract

In this paper I review evidence from recent studies, both qualitative and quantitative, about change in levels of voluntary action and charitable giving, including studies of voluntary action, the effects of economic change on voluntary action, charitable giving, and participation in associations. I also consider qualitative evidence about people's reactions when asked about their capacities for additional voluntary action, and concerning the extent to which they believe they are likely to engage in voluntary action in the future. The practical implications of this are also discussed, including whether and to what extent it is realistic to expect much change in levels of engagement, and the relationship between voluntary action and current social and economic policies.

Keywords: volunteering, civic participation, charitable giving, social capital, cohort variations, longitudinal change, austerity

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Introduction

Central to debates in British public policy at the present time is the assumption that the level of citizen engagement can be increased. But can it? And which groups and communities are most likely to engage and to benefit from such an increase? Is there evidence that we can shift the dials in an upward direction? Are citizens committed to increasing their engagement, cynical about the motivations of those who ask them to do so, or constrained by material circumstances from becoming more involved?

The United Nations has referred to voluntary action as an “essential renewable resource” for social development. That statement raises a number of questions about what sort of a resource we are talking about: something which has direct benefits, in the form of services delivered, support given to individuals, or funds raised, or something which has latent or indirect benefits to society more generally, as my colleague Daiga Kamerade has recently argued (see TSRC WP 134). In the context of social capital debates there are arguments to be had whether volunteering is a cause of social capital or an outcome of it, and whether voluntary action generates the beneficial social and economic consequences which its advocates claim (e.g. are high levels of participation associated with improved governance or enhanced trust?).

Those are questions which have attracted extensive academic attention. This theme has of course featured in prominent work on social capital, as in Putnam’s emphasis on the “civic generation” that fought in World War II and subsequently contributed substantially to community life in the USA (Putnam, 2000). There are extensive critiques of the concept of

social capital as well as challenges to the interpretations of social trends advanced by various commentators (e.g. Fine, 2010). Scholars have certainly questioned whether social capital can in some way account for variations in social outcomes between communities and whether it can compensate for variations in material circumstances (McCulloch et al., 2012).

But leaving those wider debates to one side, for today's presentation I focus on the narrower question of what is happening to levels of engagement in voluntary action and charitable giving. Is volunteering a renewable resource or are the stocks of this element of social capital being reduced? Can we expand the proportion of citizens engaged in their communities in response to austerity or to other emerging demands? What are the distributional consequences of doing so – for example, won't greater reliance on voluntarism be to the benefit of the most prosperous communities, as our work on the civic core (Mohan and Bulloch, 2012) suggests? At the very least, do we need to protect existing stocks of social capital, by ensuring that current and future generations are engaged to at least the same level as their predecessors?

There is a lot of disagreement in this area. Methodology is destiny. In other words how we define voluntary action influences the results we get from surveys. Firstly, the categories used in the analysis of voluntary action are, it is said, not always recognised by individuals in practice. As exemplified in a 2005 Home Office document, volunteering is typically understood as “An activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives.” In the UK, a distinction is made in social surveys between formal and informal volunteering. Formal voluntary action involves the giving of help through an organisational structure and survey questions – such as those in the Citizenship Survey or its successor, the Community Life survey – now ask individuals to respond to a list of prompts about the kinds of help they have given, and the types of organisation of which they are members. Informal voluntary action – sometimes referred to as “direct volunteering” (Salamon, Sokolowski, 2011) - refers to individual acts of assistance of a more spontaneous kind, given to other members of one's own community.

Debates are further complicated by the different methods used to measure voluntary action in surveys. For example, individuals are more or less likely to recall certain elements of voluntary activity, depending on whether questions are posed in terms of unpaid work or unpaid help. Respondents do not necessarily perceive what they do as work, although depending on the phrasing and sequencing of questions, they appear to be more likely to report certain elements of activity (Tarling, 2000; Rooney et al, 2004; Taylor, 2004, 2005). TSRC work by Andrew McCulloch also showed that surveys undertaken at comparable times generated quite different results depending on whether volunteering was defined in terms of unpaid work or unpaid help. The specific prompts in the Citizenship Survey generate a high

rate of volunteering, while the single-question approach of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) produces a low estimate of voluntary activity.

A further measurement challenge is capturing the depth of engagement in voluntary action. Recent literature (Hustinx, 2001; Hustinx and Lammertyn, 2003; Macduff, 2003, 2005) has begun to speak of short-term and one-off voluntary acts – “episodic” volunteering, associated with reflexive and individualised approaches to voluntarism. This view features in arguments by Sampson et al (2005) that social action (particularly protest and campaigning activity) increasingly takes the form of one-off acts of mobilisation, rather than regular participation through formal organisational structures. Survey questions based on the number of hours committed to volunteering, or the frequency with which it occurs, may not necessarily pick up such participation.

Indeed, can one measure volunteering if respondents do not recognise the term? It has occasionally been argued that the very term is off-putting to some sections of the population (particularly the young). And as a final indication of the malleability of concepts and policy in this area, note that there has recently been talk of a looser concept of “social action”, which appears to refer to a greater range of pro-social behaviours by individuals, and is not constrained by survey definitions of formal and informal volunteering.

What is happening to rates and levels of engagement?

Cross-sectional perspectives

Is volunteering an “essential renewable resource” as the United Nations would have it? Are the reserves finite, or can we expand them? Do resources of this kind become exhausted through overuse?

As earlier TSRC work by Staetsky and Mohan (2011) showed, and as others have developed in more detail, rates of voluntary action reported by surveys can vary two or three-fold depending on the nature of the questions asked and the definitions given to respondents by surveyors. Nevertheless the British studies that exist do show relative stability despite variations in questions used. A broad and inclusive set of questions will typically generate an estimate that around 40 percent of the population volunteers in a typical year while between 20 and 30% do so at least monthly.

A lifetime ago, a social survey found that “no matter in what sort of area they [survey respondents] lived....less than one-third [of respondents] were found to be giving any sort of regular help to people outside their families”. This is by the well-known social research agency, Mass Observation, from work they did in 1947 to support William Beveridge’s study of voluntary action. Our most robust contemporary survey has been the Citizenship Survey (2001-11, followed by the Community Life survey from 2012). Typically the Citizenship

Survey suggests that the proportion of the adult population giving unpaid help to voluntary organisations in England and Wales at least monthly has been between 25 – 29%.

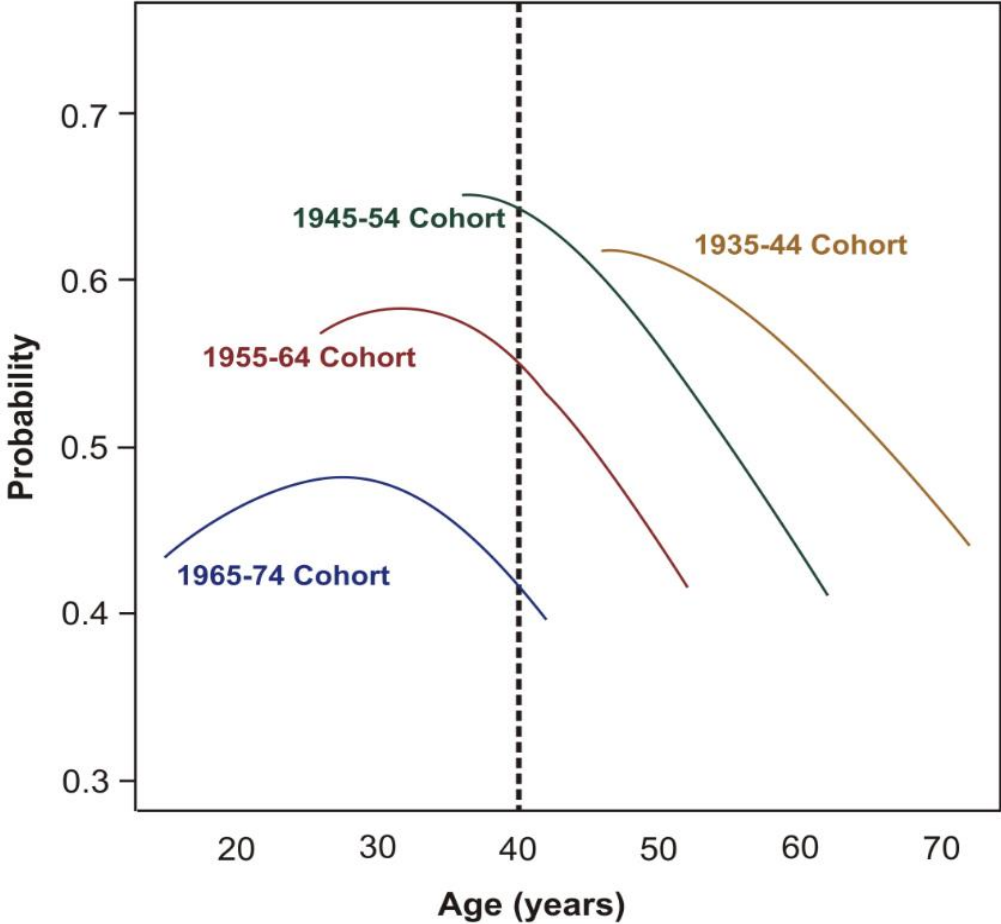
That survey asks questions about two types of volunteering (formal and informal) on both a monthly and an annual basis. Perhaps the most notable feature is that around 7/10 of the population report some kind of volunteering on at least an annual basis. Particularly for regular formal volunteering, that is giving unpaid help through organisations at least once a month, there is a great deal of stability. For informal volunteering on the other hand we do see some signs of a decline between 2005 and 2009 followed by a slight increase. The Citizenship Survey was cancelled for 2011-12 but was replaced by the much smaller community life survey in August 2012 onwards. As you will see the figures picked up in 2012-13 before falling back in 2013-14. One suggestion has been that the boost to volunteering was due to social desirability bias – that is, because the survey was in the field around the time of the Olympic Games, in which volunteers played a significant, even a starring role, respondents were more likely to recall incidences of volunteering in their own lives.

Longitudinal perspectives

These are surveys which ask people at one point in time about how much they are engaged in their communities, and different people are asked each year. What happens when you track individuals over time? The British Household Panel Survey, which follows the same people year in year out, we find that there is a base level of voluntary activity in any one year, but over a period of time much higher proportions of the population report volunteering. Engagement may be episodic, and related to life events that people go through, but we dip in and out depending on circumstances. We can measure this for thousands of people. In a lifecourse perspective the true level of engagement may be much higher than snapshots like the Citizenship Survey suggest.

The UK's Understanding Society survey is of course a world leader in this field and here is one example of its use in longitudinal work. This is from [Andrew McCulloch's paper in *Sociology* \(2014\)](#). He used the BHPS which has tracked several thousand individuals since the early 1990s and has regularly asked them about number of types of voluntary organisation of which they are members. We know there are age-related influences on participation – there is generally an inverse-U shaped distribution - but we need to be able to distinguish the effects of cohorts (e.g. are people born before 1945 more or less likely to be engaged in voluntary organisations than those born after 1945 when measured at same age). We might want to do this because people from different cohorts have lived through very different social and economic circumstances that might affect the likelihood of participation.

To investigate this, you need to be able to ask people born in different cohorts the same questions at the same ages. The BHPS is useful for this because it's been running for over 20 years. If you therefore define different ten year birth cohorts, e.g. from 1935 onwards, the ages at which people from different cohorts are observed in the survey begin to overlap (e.g. one could compare 40 year olds born in 1951 with 40 year olds born in 1961 by using their responses to questions posed in 1991 and 2001 respectively).



The graph shows that there are 40 year olds from three separate cohorts in this survey. These could be people born in the early 1950s observed in the early 1990s, people born between 1955-64 observed on several occasions, and people born in 1965 or 1966 observed in 2005 or 2006.

The vertical axis shows the probability of belonging to at least one type of organisation, and the graph shows the predicted trajectories with age for each of four birth cohorts. When we compare people across cohorts measured at the same age, there is a decline – there is a drop in the mean number of types of organisations of which they are members. The mean number of types of organisation drops by nearly 1/3 if you compare men born 1945-54 with men born 1965-74. It's true that one response to it is that the nature of participation has

changed in the 20 years the survey has been running, but the great advantage of this survey method is that it holds the categories it is measuring constant over time.

Sarah Smith makes similar points about [engagement in charitable giving](#), using a different survey, the Living Costs and Food Survey, covering over 200 000 respondents (7000 a year) from 1978 – 2008. Because the questions were consistent over the period of the survey they could identify individuals from particular birth cohorts (e.g. 1910-14, 1920-24, 1930-34, etc) and compare their donation behaviour at the same ages. As with studies of participation there is an age-related inverted-U distribution, with the proportion of the population who donate rising to a peak in the early 50s before declining again. Within this overall pattern there was a rise in the likelihood of individuals donating over the first three cohorts in the survey, but thereafter, from the cohort born 1940-44, participation rates fell. The likelihood of donation for someone born in the early 1930s was around ten percentage points higher than their equivalent born in the early 1960s and observed at the same age (e.g. someone born 1934, aged 44 in 1978, compared to someone born 1964 and observed aged 44 in 2008). However this analysis pointed to some cause for optimism in that those born in the 1980s were slightly more likely to be donating than their counterparts born in the 1970s, when observed at the same age.

Effects of economic circumstances on engagement

The Citizenship / Community Life Surveys offer more than a hint that volunteering declined at a time of recession and this is confirmed by the work of Chaeyoon Lim and James Laurence. There is a summary of their findings [here](#) and an extended version in the [British Journal of Sociology](#). Firstly they find a reduction in the proportions of the population involved in voluntary activity during the recession, and argued that this could not be accounted for by the likelihood that individuals themselves were experiencing hardship, because they controlled for individual characteristics. However the reduction in the rate of engagement was greatest for informal volunteering and there were notable geographical differences, at the expense of disadvantaged areas.

They also find not just a reduction in the rate of engagement but also in the level of engagement. The Citizenship Survey asked people to recall how many hours they spend on voluntary activities (both formal and informal) in the preceding four weeks. Quarterly data from the survey were available from 2007 onwards. Their analysis suggested that for both formal and informal volunteering there were substantial reductions in the hours committed, the timing of which coincided with the economic recession almost exactly. Their estimate was that in total this meant that overall there was roughly a 25% reduction in community

engagement – and on this measure the social recession was considerably bigger than the financial one.

In a separate paper Lim and Laurence show how labour market circumstances from the 1980s have traceable effects on engagement even decades later. In the UK they use data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS), which follows a cohort of individuals born during one week in March 1958. Respondents were followed up at various intervals (1974 (age 16), 1981 (23), 1991 (33), 2000 (42), 2008(50)) and questions on participation were asked in several waves of the survey. In addition the survey gathered data on the labour market histories of respondents. The [key emphasis of their work](#) is that controlling for numerous individual characteristics, adverse labour market experiences, particularly in the 1980s, when redundancy was the largest single mechanism through which people lost jobs, were also reflected in reduced levels of engagement even decades later. They emphasised job displacement – that is, involuntary job loss through mechanisms such as redundancy or workplace closures. Displacement was clearly associated with reduced participation in later life. What mattered seemed to be how job loss took place and how quickly a respondent returned to paid employment. The effects seemed to emerge slowly over time, so negative effects of job displacement which were apparent between the ages of 33 and 42 became more pronounced between the ages of 42 and 50. Their suggestion was that job displacement sets individuals on different career trajectories of engagement, stalling the rates at which they join organisations, and then producing a faster rate of dropout. This they attributed to the ways in which sudden job loss severed people’s networks (workplace, unions) through which they found opportunities to develop and maintain social participation.

Looking forward: do people want to engage in voluntary action?

We rarely ask people about how they are likely to respond to requests for voluntary effort in the future. We have however two illustrations from recent research about such reactions. One is the Mass Observation directive issued in 2012 by the Third Sector Research Centre and the other is a qualitative module distributed to 220 respondents to the NCDS when they were 50, in 2008.

Mass Observers’ reflections on the Big Society

The Mass Observation directive was distributed to the Mass Observation panel in 2012 and at that time discussion of the “Big society” had somewhat passed its peak following several relaunches of the policy post-2010. Nevertheless the Government were still pursuing the idea and we explored it inter alia by asking individuals about whether they themselves

felt that they had the capacity for voluntary action, and about whether their communities had the capacities to do more.

Observers were asked to comment on whether they have the capacity to do more voluntary work. Of those that commented directly (n.58) on this issue, the majority (n.50) indicated that they do not have the capacity to do more. A little over a half of these (n.27) indicated that they were already engaged but could not take anything further on; whilst a smaller proportion (n.23) indicated that they are currently not engaged in voluntary work. This latter statement is interesting insofar as, by virtue of their participation in Mass Observation, respondents could be seen as volunteers.

Reasons for these attitudes and practices varied. Of those observers currently volunteering, but stating they have no capacity for additional work, some identified being too stretched by their informal caring commitments, such as looking after partners with ill-health or baby-sitting for family members. This informal voluntary work, undertaken because of strong social ties, was prioritised above formal volunteering. Other observers indicated that current commitments to volunteering for voluntary organisations means they do not have time to take on anything further. Older observers discussed the impact of age on their capacity to volunteer, with some elderly observers discussing how they are struggling with existing commitments, and are in the process of reducing their formal and informal volunteering. As mentioned earlier, some in this state of transition are replacing donations of their time, with monetary donations to causes that they support.

Those observers that stated that they do not currently volunteer and do not have the capacity to do so in the near future, did not identify what they perceived voluntary work to consist of. As discussed in our section on engagement practices, there are contradictions in a small number of narratives where observers state they are not engaged in volunteering work, but appear to be undertaking informal activity by providing help to friends and family. Nevertheless, a small proportion of observers were very categorical about their motivations for not engaging in formal voluntary work. These reasons included what Brodie et al. (2011) describe as a lack of 'practical resources' (p.40), being exhausted by paid work, or by looking after homes and children; being ill; being too old; and being disabled. Yet a small number had made a conscious decision not to take on formal volunteering roles.

As to community capacities, the observers were asked whether the communities in which they live have the capacity to meet their own needs. Of the 100 written scripts analysed, 56 writers responded directly to this question¹. Most framed their responses in the light of what

¹ Seven of the eight writers that stated that they live in poor areas responded to this question. However only three made a connection between the poverty of the area and its capacity to act for itself.

they know of their communities, the individuals that make up these communities, and the type of activities that their communities had engaged in previously. Although only 13 observers were very positive about the capacity of their communities to provide for some of their needs, the same number of writers were very negative. None were fully confident about their communities being able to provide for all of their needs, for example, writer R4256 wrote:

I think that communities can affect useful changes when individuals act together with a sense of specific purpose with a concrete objective in mind; but this is usually very dependent on a few key people doing most of the organising and the rest as 'moral support'. I don't think that many communities could successfully sustain more than a few initiatives for more than a relatively short time.

The ambivalence of writers as to whether their communities could provide for their own needs reflected some complex thinking relating to the socio-economic circumstances of different communities. Some writers from more affluent areas commented on the level of wealth and skills of people in their community, a concept that Keohane *et al* (2011) describe as 'community wealth':

The area that I live in is relatively very wealthy and has a high proportion of retired people who, by and large, are pensioners with good health and a high disposable income. They are of independent means and no longer need to work. Consequently there is a large reserve of these people who are both capable and committed to voluntary work within the community, with a keen commitment to local causes.

As discussed above, some of the writers living in more affluent areas indicated that currently their skills are being used for mutual benefit or 'luxury volunteering', as opposed to responding to acute social need. Indeed, there is less likely to be acute social need in more affluent areas (see Lindsey, 2013). Writers from more deprived areas indicated that 'community wealth' is lacking, as in the description of the ex-mining town inhabited by one respondent.

So there is a community, definitely, but unfortunately not one that would pull together to make things happen. There's a kind of fatigue that's come with being economically downtrodden, a fatalism. People don't seem to have much confidence and rely on others to make a stand.

This point is also evidenced in a recent mixed-methods comparative case-study undertaken by Lindsey (2013), which found that the skills, energy, confidence and connections to take up the Big Society agenda that were in evidence in an area of affluence, were singularly lacking in a nearby area of deprivation.

What people might do in the future: the National Child Development Study (NCDS)

Can we expect the current baby boom generation to continue the same level of activity in their communities exhibited by their predecessors? In TSRC Katherine Brookfield, Vicki Boltn and Jane Parry explored the motivations and experiences of 50-year-olds who were part of the NCDS. They used a qualitative module of this study, the Social Participation and Identity study, to [look at the experiences of 220 respondents](#). The NCDS also asked its respondents, when aged 50, to imagine what their futures would look like ten years down the line (Elliott, 2012).. They were invited to contribute reflections on the theme “Imagine you are 60” and were given relatively unstructured prompts for the exercise.

We are still analysing this material but what is notable is the relatively limited frequency with which people refer to voluntary action. To determine whether they did or not we searched text of the responses for phrases like “volunteer / voluntary work”, “charity work”, “volunteering”, “Helping” and associated phrases like “involved” / “involvement”. We checked a sample of the remaining responses and found nothing that appeared to have escaped our attention. The transcripts from the “imagine you are 60” module suggest that only around 11% of respondents envisage much in the way of community engagement by the time they are 60, in contrast to the 26% who reported involvement in voluntary work aged 50.

It might not be surprising to find this discrepancy since no specific prompts were given about volunteering, unpaid help and so forth, and we know from the volunteering literature that the questions used will influence recall and response. The anticipated rates of engagement are low but we find some expected patterns. Those who are currently volunteering are 4 or 5 times more likely to envisage doing so at 60; there are strong social class and educational gradients; and women are three times as likely as men to envisage that they will continue to be involved.

Conclusions

If there is a presumption that we want to push levels of engagement up, remember, firstly, that engagement is already high. Most people, for all or part of their lives, have at least some level of involvement in pro-social behaviours, so there’s a question about how much more you can expect people to do. Fewer than 10% join no associations, do not volunteer, and give nothing to charity.

Beveridge would probably welcome this. His 1947 survey of voluntary action, which featured the quote that opened this paper, was preceded by the 1944 White Paper on employment policy, in which he also played a crucial role. The government of that time accepted as the aim of government policy the maintenance of a high and stable level of employment after the

war. They didn't speak of a high and stable level of voluntary action, and there is now evidence that recession and austerity has significant and measureable effects on the level of such engagement. We may not be able to manage the economy in such a way as to generate full employment but it is worth broadening out policy debates to consider the effects on voluntary action of the way the economy is managed.

Welfare states now confront circumstances not anticipated at the time of their inception. These include insecure, unremunerative and precarious employment, which must challenge people's ability to commit to voluntary work. Housing policies seem destined to promote segregation: housing benefit policies will likely increase churning in the housing market for low-income groups while singles and couples will probably get on the housing ladder via small studios in developments where you may get a cappuccino but you won't have a community centre. Commuting distances, along with TV a prime suspect in Putnam's work on the decline of social capital, are increasing. Educational policies promote selection by mortgage and increasingly draw parents into voluntary initiative not just to support schools but to set them up in the first place.

Widening the argument if we want to promote more voluntary action we need to recognise that we are working against the grain of economic and housing policy. For all the publicity about giving people in large workplaces the right to 3 days paid leave to volunteer, these are not typical workplaces and they are likely to become less so. Existing and probable future work patterns are not conducive to regular commitment. We also need to consider how we design communities to facilitate interaction and engagement. This is a matter of how we make the relevant infrastructure available at a time when large new housing developments seem to be getting built with very little in the way of communal facilities. And there is also evidence that welfare regimes can facilitate participation, for example by providing more support to those out of the labour market to enable them to continue to engage.

Finally we need a positive message. The sense of exhaustion we get from our Mass Observation directive respondents suggests they need better reasons for engaging than those offered by austerity or the illusory hope that volunteering may get them a job.

References

About the Centre

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

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Quantitative Analysis

This research stream is designed to improve our understanding of the third sector through a large-scale programme of quantitative work. It is designed to help us better explain the distribution of third sector organisations, analyse their contribution to society and the economy and understand their dynamics. We are interested in data not just on third sector organisations and their resources, but also on both financial inputs to the sector (funding flows from various sources) and human inputs (e.g. the paid workforce and volunteers).

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