Third Sector Research Centre

Working Paper 8

Exploring below the radar: issues of theme and focus

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Exploring below the radar: issues of theme and focus

Abstract

This paper explores different dimensions of below the radar (BTR) activity and some of the key variables that need to be considered. It seeks to define what we mean by 'below the radar' activity and identify different radars that might form the focus of research.

It is clear from discussion around BTR activity, that it is necessary to move beyond simplistic definitions that focus on registration to a more sophisticated approach encompassing a range of different radars. Similarly, there is a need to move away from a deficit model, which makes negative assumptions about what it means to be 'below the radar'.

We have tried to develop a sampling frame to differentiate BTR activity from more mainstream activities being researched by other work streams. We want to ensure that small community based actions are also included in the economic/impact, service delivery and social enterprise elements of TSRC research.

Our exploration of the characteristics of below the radar activity culminates in a series of issues to be researched further, rather than reaching definitive conclusions. Our understanding, and classification, of such activity will evolve, as we use theoretical and empirical knowledge to inform our thinking. Thus, while we have outlined our initial thoughts around defining BTR activity, we expect this thinking to be influenced by the findings from our fieldwork.

The next step for the BTR work stream is to develop a methodology to explore the full range of BTR activity sketched out in this paper.

Keywords

Community organisations, groups and activities; below/under the radar, governance, influence and funding

Introduction

A working paper produced on the 16th October 2008 set out early thinking around research directions for the 'below the radar' activities work stream but it did not establish identify any criteria for identifying such activity. As we progress to the evidence collection stage of the work, it is becoming increasingly clear that it is necessary to:

- set out what we mean by the term(s) under the radar activity to enable the development of a sampling frame

- differentiate under the radar activity from the more mainstream activities being researched by the other work streams

- ensure that small community based actions are also included in the economic/impact, service delivery and social enterprise elements of TSRC research.

While there is no authoritative definition of 'below the radar' that we can point to, the term is now frequently used in discussions about the third sector. A number of organisations and commentators have referred to activity that is under or below the radar. Thompson (2008) and MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) describe activities undertaken by small organisations or social entrepreneurs as 'beneath the radar'. MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) stated that these organisations generally lack legal or and charitable status, a point emphasised by the workshop participants attending the TSRC launch. Lack of legal status is considered the norm for most migrant and refugee organisations (MRCOs) (Zetter *et al.* 2005; Phillimore *et al.* 2009). It has been estimated that some 95% of community based organisations have annual incomes of under £2,000 (Guardian; 8/11/2000; Holland & Ritvo 2008), and are not legally constituted. Lack of registered or legal status appear to dominate understandings of beneath or below the radar (BTR) in the literature. More recently research projects have been commissioned by the Northern Rock Foundation[1], Regional Action West Midlands[2] and the Office of the Third Sector[3] all aimed at exploring third sector activity occurring in 'below the radar organisations'. These projects look specifically at organisations, rather than activities, and refer to such organisations as those that are under the regulatory radar and thus unincorporated or unregulated. Such organisations do not appear in databases held by the Charity Commission, Companies House, the Registrar of Community Interest Companies, and Guidestar.

Consideration also needs to be given to broader issues of governance. The extent to which BTR groups are organised is a factor that requires further examination. Morgan (2008) asks whether organisations need to be governed collectively in order to be defined as voluntary organisations. He raises the issue of whether formal governing documents are an indicator of existence, an issue faced by the Charity Commission following the 1993/4 Charities Acts. MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) argue that micro–organisations are invariably informal, lacking the direct representative decision making associated with formal status.

In addition researchers have tended to adopt an approach to defining 'under' or 'beneath' the radar activity, terms that we use here interchangeably with 'below' the radar, which is simple and relates to

evidence collection mechanisms. Participants at the TSRC launch argue that under the radar activity often emerged from organisations that do not appear on notional or often local data-bases. The main databases associated with being on the radar include those held by national network organisations such as Voices4Change, and the Community Sector Coalition.

Whilst organisations or activities that are unregistered or not included on national databases clearly fall under existing categories of being under the radar, there are other dimensions to being under the radar that need to be explored. These might include types of community action that is not undertaken by organisations, but instead by entrepreneurs, individuals or activists. It is important to outline what was agreed in the 'Case for Support' application by Birmingham and Southampton Universities to the Cabinet Office/Office of the Third Sector, ESRC and Barrow Cadbury Trust. The proposal established that a below the radar work-steam would be developed which would:

> *'focus on identifying and scoping different and innovative forms of voluntary action and the development of new social movements and 'DIY community action.'*

It is possible that actions undertaken by organisations that *are* registered in some way, but those organisations are nonetheless operating below some kind of radar.   The lack of sophistication in the current understandings of the scope of under the radar activity has been acknowledged by the Office of the Third Sector:

> *'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. The term is often associated with small community organisations which are not large enough to register with the Charity Commission or Companies House and are perhaps associated more closely with community building and participation than with service delivery. However, many very small organisations do register and so suggestions that the under the radar segment of the sector is synonymous with smaller charities can be misleading.* [A]

In order to develop a wider and more sophisticated understanding of below the radar activity we need to explore the types of activity that occur below other forms of radar than simply the bureaucratic or regulatory radar. Alternative types of radar might include:

- a support, funding or capacity building radar where activities do not receive any kind of resource from the state or network organisations
- a policy radar where organisations or activists are not engaged in any kind of policy agenda either because they have not been recognised or credited with any role or have elected to remain outside of radar
- an influence radar where despite a desire to influence policy or provision they are unable to bring their concerns to notice.

In theoretical and empirical terms it is possible that some kinds of action are beneath a knowledge radar, where there are gaps in understanding about their role, function etc. in academic, policy or even mainstream third sector circles.   Given the heterogeneous nature of under the radar activity and that the remit of the under the radar work stream includes the exploration of new forms of organisation, representation and participation, it is important to develop a mechanism that can take account of the full range of 'under the radar' activity and this would include web-based activity.

Understanding these forms of voluntary action should be a critical element of the under the radar work stream given concerns expressed by Meade (2009) *'that state-funded NGOs are colonising the few political and discursive spaces that might otherwise accommodate more 'organic' social movements'.* Research might also cover activities that

- have been 'on the policy radar' but change or disappear as their areas of work becomes less prominent in the public arena (e.g. immigration and nationality advice)
- deliver public services for example faith based organisations, but are not in receipt of public funding and/or recognised as doing so in local health and social care planning mechanisms
- have a high public profile but have deliberately opted out of 'mainstream' agendas and have no formal/legal status such as new social movements/anti-globalisation and viral campaigns.

Having established different characteristics of 'under the radar' this paper goes on to explore the dimensions of under the radar activity that need to be considered when seeking to identify groups, activities and organisations to be included in systematic research of under the radar activity. It begins by examining dimensions of the support, policy and influence radars such as size and scale, legal status, staffing and income that fall inside some of the dimensions of 'under the radarness' outlined above. In order to consider the complexities surrounding the dimensions of under the radar activity we take a brief look at the literature in conjunction with the suggestions made during the launch discussion. The discussion herein is intended to provide a starting point that will help to guide the literature searches currently underway and the overview interviews planned for late spring. It is likely that the this paper will continue to evolve through the completion the full literature review, BTR think-pieces, proposed early stage seminars, and empirical research.

Support

Having established that all unregistered third sector activity is automatically under the radar, the key question in respect of access to resources is at what point can a registered third sector organisation be considered to be under the support radar? Access to funds is seen as important by some commentators. The TSRC launch workshop participants viewed under the radar activities as emanating from those groups that survive on small or occasional grants. Thompson (2008), researching BTR third sector groups working with children and families, explored two levels of funding. His survey was open to organisations with annual income of less that £250K because, he suggests, organisations of this size felt small, relative to big organisations, especially when they were trying to work at larger scales than the local. Within this level Thompson identifies 'smaller' under the radar organisations with income of less than £50,000 per year. Little has been written about under the radar migrant and refugee community activities although it has been acknowledged that small organisations dominate the BME third sector. The work of Zetter *et al.* (2005), Phillimore *et al.* (2009) and Phillimore & Goodson (2009) finds that extremely low incomes and irregular funding are the norm for most migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs). MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) do not identify any maximum annual income levels associated with being under the radar preferring instead to stress the lack of dependable agency funding of any significance. Conversely, some organisations may hold

substantial capital assets (e.g. tenants/village halls) or have annual turnovers of over both £50,000 and £250,000 generated through trading activity (e.g. community centres with bars/room hire facilities), yet still employ no professional staff. The majority of such groups are likely to fall under a support definition of under the radar, with incomes of less than £10,000 per annum that are largely self-generated (Community Matters/LGA: 2006).

In addition to income and funding, but closely related to the issue of finance, commentators have noted the absence of capital resources in BTR activities. The lack of premises and the use of volunteers' homes or donated space were seen as a key barrier to the further development in small migrant organisations (Zetter et al. 2005; Phillimore et al. 2009; Phillimore & Goodson 2009). Mac Gillivray et al. (2001) also note that other micro activities more generally often have no regular premises. Lack of funding also means that organisations often have no full-time or permanent staff (Mac Gillivray et al. 2001; Thompson 2008). The key variables around support are included in the summary of dimensions of under the radar activity set out in Table 1.

Policy

Community based organisations may lack status, influence or, indeed, official recognition by statutory agencies (McCabe *et al.* 2007). However, issues of 'community' and 'community organisation' have played an increasingly important role in governmental, and cross party, policy in recent years. Part of this agenda has been informed by drivers towards a mixed economy of welfare, procurement and commissioning procedures and increasing the role of the formal voluntary sector in public service provision (Home Office 2005). Accordingly, investment has been made in promoting the ability of voluntary organisations to engage with this agenda, through ChangeUp, Future Builders and, more recently, the Big Lottery BASIS programme.

There has been a parallel process in financing community sector infrastructure driven in part by concerns around the perceived decline in social capital and accompanying 'democratic deficit' (Putnam 2000) and 'super-diversity' and the breakdown of community cohesion (Cantle 2005). This has included the creation of Community Empowerment Networks, and subsequently Regional Empowerment Networks (Home Office 2004), and a growing interest in concepts of community anchor organisations and community leadership (CLG 2007). However, such investment in the community sector, with similar capacity building investment in faith based and BME organisations, has often been short lived, focused on priority/Neighbourhood Renewal Fund areas and been dependent on short term finance (e.g. European funding such as ERDF/ESF or more recently Prevention of Violent Extremism funds (PVE)). It also lacked a clear definition or understanding of the meaning and aims of 'community capacity building' (Harris 2008). The extent to which this activity has impacted upon the under the radar voluntary sector is unclear.

Criteria	Issues to be considered
1. Staffing	Permanent, temporary, or voluntary
2. Resources	Permanent, temporary or ad hoc accommodation Any ownership of significant capital assets Leases
3. Income	Annual income levels Regularity of income
4. Security	Lack secure contracts with government/local government/pcts
5. Status	Registration or incorporation Inclusion on databases of network organisations
6. Name	Established name or alternative descriptor
7. Relationship with policy agendas and/or relationships with national network/representation bodies	Extent to which participating in influencing structures at all levels and in TS networks. Whether seeking influence or avoiding policy engagement. Co-option by policy agendas.
8. Governance	Legal structures adopted Level of organisations Management structures Leadership
9. Scale of activity	Number of users, events, activists
10. Length of establishment	Months/ years
11. Number of actions	Extent to which activity is sustained over time
12. Purpose	Mutual aid Lobbying Advocacy Other
13. Locality	Neighbourhood, local, regional, national

Thus, despite policy spend (rather than investment), there remains a substantial gap between the policy rhetoric around small community based/BME activities and a real understanding either of the numbers of such groups, their functions, contribution to policy agendas, or the extent to which they operate outside mainstream structures and agendas and therefore remain 'below the radar'.

The conventional approaches to categorising third sector activity to explore role and function is likely to prove problematic for many under the radar activities. Small BME, refugee and community groups do not fall neatly into the 'classic' classifications of the voluntary sector. Using, for example, the International Classification of Non-profit Organisations (Salamon & Anheier 1997), even the smallest

of such groups can be fulfilling multiple functions: direct service delivery, advocacy, community representation, cultural and educational activities (Minkler 2005). Thus, BTR organisations may be addressing multiple governmental objectives but remain 'below the radar' in terms of legal status, funding or recognition by policy and research communities

For Kendal & Knapp (1996) voluntary governance, along with non-profit distributing, independence and formality (the structural-operational definition) are the key factors in understanding and defining the sector. However, relating voluntary and community action to these variables would mean excluding *'informal groups of people, acting on a voluntary basis, working together to solve common problems by taking action themselves and with others'* (Richardson 2008). These are amongst the key groups it will be important to capture in the under the radar work stream as we explore new forms of organising. It may be necessary to explore the extent to which under the radar activities or groups become co-opted by the state or policy agendas and are pushed or actively collaborate towards formalisation in ways which prevent or inhibit grass roots community action (Dominelli 2006) particularly given Labonte's assertion that '*community groups transform the private troubles of support groups into public issues for policy remediation'*. Thus in exploring the policy dimension of under the radar activity we need to consider the effects of lack of policy focus and, of policy co-option. The key variables around policy are included Table 1.

Influence

Most commentators argue that BTR is action undertaken below the *policy* radar that has no clear connection with major statutory players and their policy objectives. Thompson's (2008) survey identified few differences in the experiences of the smaller (<£50,000 income) and larger (<£250,00) organisations except that the smaller organisations very rarely took part in influencing activities often because they lacked the time to participate, or felt they were unlikely to impact on policy or provision. It is necessary to differentiate between those groups who elect to be outside the mainstream, a route sometimes taken by MRCOs serving communities without full legal rights and entitlements (Zetter *et al.* 2005), and those who lack influence for political reasons or because they lack the capacity to represent their community of interest. In their work building the capacity of MRCOs to engage in policy influence in Birmingham, Phillimore & Goodson (2009) found that organisations lacked sufficient awareness of institutional culture to engage in meaningful consultation or influencing with policymakers or service providers. Burn and Taylor (1998) and MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) both argue that micro organisations rarely have a formal relationship with the state.

The TSRC launch workshop participants were keen to stress the importance of including organisations that are engaged by the policy community around a particular issue (e.g. community cohesion) and subsequently lose influence when policy changes.

Issues of purpose and focus

Under the radar groups are both diverse and numerous although the scale of the sector is open to question. For example MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) argue there are more than 900,000 micro-

organisations in the UK while research by Mcleod *et al* (2001) indicate that there are an estimated 5,500 BME organisations in England and Wales. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is a substantial under-estimate and reflects how little is known about BTR activity in the available academic and practice literature. The variation in estimates of under the radar activity reinforce firstly the need for activity to establish the scale of the sector. Secondly, they reflect the enormity of the task ahead. We do need to ensure that our activities are tightly focused and thus may need to consider the types of action that might *not* be defined as under the radar because of reasons such as purpose or extent of activities.

Whilst not integral to our understanding of what constitutes under the radar activity, it is worth considering the issue of purpose. MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) explore in some depth the difference between self-help and mutual aid. They are clear that self-help does not move beyond assisting close friends and family whereas mutual aid involves reciprocity and therefore has a wider social purpose. A similar distinction is made by Morgan (2008) when he asks whether voluntary sector researchers should be interested in organisations undertaking private voluntary activity, mainly for the participants' own benefit, or only in organisations with wider community aims? Most work is focussed upon the latter, but excluding the former means that vast numbers of 'interest groups' are omitted. Many RCOs, community groups and social movements evolve from actions by concerned individuals aiding their peers. This pattern is reflected in the community development literature (Ledwith 2005; Craig *et al.* 2008) which explores the relationship between short life community action and the building of sustainable organisations which address issues of community representation at policy, advocacy and service delivery and planning levels.

There are some examples of large organisations (i.e. Praxis) who have journeyed from self-help to the mainstream. The issue for us is at what point we decide that an organisation is worthy of attention. Here it may be necessary to make decisions about issues such as having an established name, and appropriate numbers of users. Morgan's (2008) tongue in cheek paper uses the example of a conference dinner to indicate how almost any kind of voluntary action might be defined as a voluntary organisation. He asks whether an activity must have a minimum period of operation to be classed as voluntary action. Chanan and West (1999) consider the possession of a contact address to be a minimum requirement for studying voluntary action. They also state that organisations must have a minimum of ten users and have undertaken some kind of activity a minimum of six times within the year before they are researched. While groups may lack status and formal governance structures it may be important, at least for research purposes, that they have an established name (Chanan and West 1999). However, there are those groups who, for political and ideological reasons, resist any form of formal governance structures, may lack a formal name, or at least collective identity, and yet can be powerful and influential, not only locally but nationally and internationally for example DIY and new social movements/anti-globalisation groups etc (Della Porta & Diani 1999). Even where the unit of study is not a formal organisation but rather a specific mutual aid activity there needs to be some measure of scale. This may include a minimum length of operation, number of users, actors or activists. The key variables around purpose and focus are included in Table 1.

Conclusions

This paper has explored different dimensions of under the radar activity and considered some of the key variables that need to be considered when looking at under the radar activity and sought to identify different radars that might form the focus of research activity. It is clear from the discussion of the characteristics of under the radar activity, that it is necessary to move beyond simplistic definitions focusing upon registration, to a more sophisticated approach encompassing a range of different radars and different trajectories. Our exploration of the characteristics of under the radar activity ends by raising a series of issues to be researched further, rather than conclusions as such.

Given the diversity of BTR, identifying those organisations, activities or groups that are relevant to our study, is challenging. We may need to identify one or two of the dimensions of 'under the radarness' and then look at the characteristics of groups falling within those categories. An obvious choice is the selection of groups that are unregistered. In addition we might select groups that are registered but under the policy, influence and/or support radars. We may also decide to move away from the dichotomy of on/off the radar and identify a continuum from having insider to outsider status which may allow the development of knowledge about different trajectories over time.

Our understanding, and classification, of what we are currently calling under the radar activity, will evolve as we use theoretical and empirical knowledge to inform our thinking. Thus while we have outlined our initial thoughts around defining BTR activity we expect this thinking to be influenced by the findings from our fieldwork. The next step for the BTR work stream is to develop a methodology to explore the full range of BTR activity sketched out in this paper.

Endnotes

[1] http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/uploadedFiles/NCVO/Events/Events_Archive/2008/Mohan%20et%20al.pdf

[2] http://www.rawm.org.uk/images/uploads/AN28_supplement.pdf

[3] http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/third_sector/assets/research%20paper%20chapter%204.pdf

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

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