

## Briefing Paper 8

### Exploring below the radar: issues of theme and focus

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#### Abstract

This paper explores different dimensions of under/below the radar (BTR) activity and some of the key variables that need to be considered when looking at under the radar activity and has 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, and a literature that assumes a deficit model for 'below the radar' groups and activities to a more sophisticated approach encompassing a range of different radars and different trajectories. We have tried to set out what we mean by the term(s) below/under the radar activity to enable the development of a sampling frame to differentiate under the radar activity from the more mainstream activities being researched by the other work streams, and 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 under the radar activity ends by raising a series of issues to be researched further, rather than conclusions as such. 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.

#### Background

This paper is part of the research stream exploring below the radar organisations.

#### Aim

To explore the characteristics and contributions of small community based organisations and more informally organised activity within the sector.

#### Objectives

To research small community based organisations including refugee and migrant groups which are the largest - but least researched and understood part of the third sector.

#### Research Questions

What does below the radar (BTR) mean - is the term helpful? Are there distinctive features about BTR organisations which make them different from mainstream voluntary organisations? How might we map and understand the impact of BTR groups at a community, practice and policy level? What is the role of such groups/activities in terms of advocacy and campaigning as well as service delivery? Are new forms of organising at a grass roots level emerging?

A working paper produced on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2008 set out early thinking around research directions for the "below the radar" activities work stream but it did not establish 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.

## Definitions

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 as a ‘short-hand’ description for, rather than concept of, small community-based organisations that constitute the major part of the Third Sector numerically (NCVO; 2009). Thompson (2008) and MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) describe activities undertaken by small organisations or social entrepreneurs as “beneath the radar”. MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) states that these organisations generally lack incorporated legal 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<sup>1</sup>, Regional Action West Midlands<sup>2</sup> and the Office of the Third Sector<sup>3</sup> 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 national (eg Charity Commission) or often local data-bases (for example, Rural Community Councils and Councils of Voluntary Service).

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-stream would be developed that 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. These may be government or local authority ‘policy radars’, the absence of some groups within ‘spheres of influence’, virtual (ICT) based organising or indeed the lack of a ‘web-presence’. 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.”<sup>4</sup>*

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 may be consciously excluded or unable to bring their concerns to notice or to impact upon policy in any way.

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 (eg 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 of the full literature review, BTR think-pieces, proposed early stage seminars, and empirical research.

## 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, and a literature that assumes a deficit model for ‘below the radar’ groups and activities 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.

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 support radars. We may also decide to move away from the dichotomy of on/off the radar and identify continua 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.

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## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> [http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/uploadedFiles/NCVO/Events/Events\\_Archive/2008/Mohan%20et%20al.pdf](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/uploadedFiles/NCVO/Events/Events_Archive/2008/Mohan%20et%20al.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> [http://www.rawm.org.uk/images/uploads/AN28\\_supplement.pdf](http://www.rawm.org.uk/images/uploads/AN28_supplement.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> [http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/third\\_sector/assets/research%20paper%20chapter%204.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/third_sector/assets/research%20paper%20chapter%204.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> OTS (2008) Draft Guidance: National Survey of Third Sector Organisations ‘Under the Radar’ Pilot

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