



Third Sector Research Centre

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Mapping the Big Society: perspectives from the Third Sector Research Centre

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Abstract

Implicit in the idea of the "big society" is the view that communities will be the first port of call in responding to social needs. There are concerns that this will be much easier in some communities than others. It is part of the role of the TSRC to assemble evidence on the distribution, resources and capacities of the third sector and the purpose of this paper is to illustrate ways in which our quantitative work contributes to a better understanding of the sector's contribution. This in turn will provide insights into the baseline from which "Big Society" policies have commenced. The paper reviews some key elements of the quantitative work we are doing and provides illustrations of the insights that we can provide. Firstly, it considers the question of the geographical distribution of third sector organisations focusing specifically on regulated organisations which say they operate at the "neighbourhood" scale. This is relevant given the strongly localist emphasis of current policies. Secondly, there is a summary of a work in progress on the idea of a "civic core": rather than focusing on headline rates of participation (e.g. in volunteering) this work attempts to quantify the relative contribution being made by different groups of the population to the total amount of effort given across three dimensions of pro-social behaviour (donation of money to charity, hours of unpaid help, and numbers of associations of which people are members). Thirdly, with an eye to current discussions about the likely effects of public expenditure reductions on the sector, there is an analysis of the exposure of third sector organisations to public funding streams. The paper concludes by considering likely developments which will impinge on our capacities to measure the Big Society.

Keywords

Big Society, third sector, voluntary organisations, volunteering, uneven development, social polarisation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the work of various researchers in TSRC, as well as postgraduate students on whose work I have drawn here or whose advice has been of great value in developing the quantitative work programme of the Centre. These are Peter Backus, Vicki Bolton, David Clifford, Frida Geyne Rajme, Andrew McCulloch, Laura Staetsky, and Joanna Taylor. In addition, work by Julia Branson (GeoData Institute, Southampton) and Steve Barnard has been crucial to the development of our evolving database on third sector organisations. The TSRC did not start from a blank slate, of course, and I would also wish to acknowledge past and present directors of the NCVO research team, particularly Karl Wilding and Les Hems, without whose electronic archives it would have been impossible to compile our panel data on registered charities. The NCVO team have also been instrumental in the development of the classification of charities.

This paper draws on presentations to the TUC-NAVCA conference, February 2011; the European Research Network on Foundations (ERNOP) conference, Vienna, 2011; the Cumberland Lodge-TSRC conference on the Future of the Third Sector, 2011; the Social Research Association conference on 'Solid Foundations or Shifting Sands: evidence of building a Big Society', 2011; and a TSRC submission to the Public Administration Select Committee inquiry, 'Smaller government, Big Society?', 2011 (available at: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmpubadm/writew/smaller/bs102.htm).

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Introduction

Definitions of the Big Society all agree that it implies a greater role for voluntarism and voluntary organisations. The government are clearly determined to increase levels of charitable giving and of volunteering (as evidenced by the recent White Paper (Cabinet Office, 2011) on these topics), to facilitate the expansion of non-profit organisations (e.g. by streamlining the process of registering charities, or by legislating to promote the spin-off of mutuals from the public sector or the creation of new 'free schools'), and to encourage the transfer of public assets and services to the voluntary sector.

However, critics suggest that the Big Society is premised on an unrealistic vision of what voluntary action can achieve, drawn from the prosperous Home Counties, in which there exist strong networks of voluntary organisations, supported by wealthy individuals, and staffed by a prosperous, well-educated citizenry many of whom have time on their hands. This may bear little relation to the complex social challenges of disadvantaged inner-city areas or to the needs of communities blighted by structural unemployment which has lasted over a generation.

A reasonable question to ask of a research centre such as TSRC is what contribution its work can make to understanding of the scope and limitations of Big Society policies. The aim of this paper is therefore to illustrate three elements of the centre's work on the distribution of voluntary resources.

- Firstly, I consider the question of mapping the distribution of third sector organisations, and show that there are challenges to resolve about some quite basic issues as to how many third sector organisations there are, how they might be classified, and how the pattern of these organisations might be related to the social and economic characteristics of communities.
- Secondly, if the Big Society is to be built on the efforts of volunteers, what do we know about the numbers, characteristics and distribution of those who volunteer? Survey design and methodology mean that results from different surveys may be incompatible. There are also arguments about headline rates of volunteering – percentages of the population engage in voluntary activity – when it might be more sensible to look at the amount of effort contributed. I therefore briefly summarise the idea of a 'civic core', a term which encapsulates the idea that some people contribute a disproportionate share of voluntary effort.
- Finally, I outline research into the extent to which voluntary organisations currently depend on public funding streams.

In the process, I also briefly describe some more general aspects of our work on each of these themes. This is not an exhaustive review of the quantitative work we are doing and fuller information is available from our website.

Counting, classifying and mapping voluntary organisations

Nobody can really agree what counts as part of the third sector. Commentators usually follow variants of the 'structural-operational' definition propounded by Salamon and Anheier (1996): the characteristics of a voluntary organisation are that it must be organised (that is, it needs to have a degree of formality, though this does not necessarily extend to having an identifiable legal form), non-profit distributing (and if it makes surpluses of any kind they must be reinvested rather than distributed to external shareholders); private, and independent of government; self-governing; and it should have an element of voluntarism in its operation. Note that these criteria do not include a discussion of the purpose of organisations; some non-profit organisations exist to advance private interests, such as trade associations, and others may benefit only selected groups of individuals (e.g. property management companies for leasehold blocks of flats). Arguments about the number and type of organisations in the sector are therefore common – a good example being the development of the term 'general charities' by NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations) and ONS (Office for National Statistics), to differentiate these entities from those charitable organisations which exist only to serve a particular group, are ultimately controlled by a government body, or which provide limited public benefits.

To the extent that we are monitoring the growth of registered third sector organisations, changes in regulations (such as financial thresholds for registration) have an effect; for example, the increase to £5000 of the threshold for registration as a charity will affect our ability to monitor the growth and characteristics of voluntary organisations. A particular challenge is that by no means all voluntary organisations take a recognisable legal form; they therefore do not appear on the lists generated by regulators, and it is extremely challenging to estimate just how many of them there are.

As a result estimates of the size of the voluntary sector vary substantially. At one end of the spectrum a very narrow definition might focus only on those charitable organisations classed as 'general charities'. This might limit the numbers to around 145,000 and a narrower definition, focusing only on those submitting a non-zero financial return, might bring the figure down to 110,000 or fewer, for England and Wales; a focus on those with an income of greater than £5000 would reduce it to somewhere around 75,000. At the opposite end of the spectrum one might include every non-profit organisation and also make an estimate of the numbers of community organisations out there which do not appear on the lists generated by regulatory bodies. This might push the numbers up to between 600,000 and 900,000 – according to the New Economics Foundation's widely-quoted work on this topic (MacGillivray, Wadhams and Conaty, 2001), though other work in which we have been involved is more circumspect and arrives at figures substantially lower than those quoted by NEF (Mohan et al., 2011). So in terms of entities with at least some recognisable degree of organisation, the numbers of third sector organisations might vary by a factor of as many as nine.

Researchers need to also consider the validity and utility of attempting to estimate the numbers of these so-called 'below the radar' organisations. What, exactly, are the benefits of knowing how many organisations there are in a particular community? Some consideration of the reasons for counting them – perhaps informed by sociological or political theories about the functioning of communities or

political systems – might be appropriate. If we can answer that question, the next problem is that in the absence of any requirement to register with a regulatory body, information on such organisations is not collected systematically. Other research shows that the kind of sources on which one might draw for such work (e.g. listings generated by local infrastructure bodies in the voluntary sector) do not consistently record the same types of organisation from one area to another. There are also formidable challenges involved in matching that information to listings of registered third sector organisations.¹ Such source material reflects the priorities and resources of a diverse range of organisations. Efforts were made, as part of the work on the National Survey of Third Sector Organisations (NSTSO), to consider the compilation of such data on a national basis, but the conclusion reached was that it would be impossible. Intensive research methods, such as the ‘micro-mapping’ work being done as part of TSRC’s workstream on below the radar organisations, are another way into this, and these will produce different estimates again; we will be producing guidance on the replication of such work.²

Restricting consideration to the regulated third sector, we then face the challenge of deciding which organisations we are interested in. Charities have had most attention, but much less is known about organisations taking other non-profit legal forms. Often all we have from readily-available sources is information about the legal form of an organisation, its name and in some cases its standard industrial classification (SIC) code. Using this information we have attempted to classify those organisations which have a regulated legal form such as a Company Limited by Guarantee, and Industrial and Provident Society, or a Community Interest Company. The intention is to attempt to work out which of these are of interest. As an example, the population for the NSTSO comprised around 40,000 TSOs which were not registered charities – for example, the majority of Industrial and Provident Societies were included, while the majority of Companies Limited by Guarantee were not. The decisions taken on these seem to have been based on criteria such as SIC codes and also on information derived from the titles of organisations (e.g. the exclusion of property management companies – CLGs set up to benefit a particular class of people, such as leaseholders in blocks of privately rented flats). Our work on this is ongoing, and we have also recently obtained data on subsets of the third sector population such as co-operatives, which we use to enhance our classification methods. (Geyne Rajme, Clifford and Mohan, 2011).

A further aspect of our work which may be of interest relates to the compilation of time series data for third sector organisations. Much existing work on the sector in the UK relies on cross-sectional data – statistical snapshots gathered at one point in time. This is in sharp contrast to the USA where the National Centre on Charitable Statistics (NCCS) has been in existence for many years. In England and Wales work on the computerisation of the Register of Charities only began in the late 1980s. Since then copies of the register have been made available but these take the form of snapshots of the data. We realised that compiling a panel of data on registered charities would greatly enhance our ability to develop analysis of change over time. Although the steady growth of the numbers and resources of registered charities is well-known, it is essential to be able to distinguish growth due to new entrants from organic growth of existing organisations. We have therefore devoted substantial effort to recovering old versions of the register. As a result we now have fairly complete runs of

statistics from 1995 onwards with some smaller datasets for 1993 and 1994. We have had to clean the data and ensure that we avoid duplication. We can now trace very considerable numbers of charities over time – around 40 000 on a more-or-less continuous basis since the mid-1990s. An example of the utility of this dataset is provided by our recent analysis of the so-called ‘Tescoisation’ of the charitable sector – the apparent concentration of resources in large organisations possibly at the expense of small ones (Backus and Clifford, 2010; Clifford and Backus, 2010). The value of such longitudinal datasets will increase over time as more years of data are added from the Register of Charities. Without the substantial investment in TSRC – and also in the Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy, which has contributed to the development of this panel dataset – this kind of work would not have been possible. We hope, in due course, to build similar research resources based on the equivalent registers in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

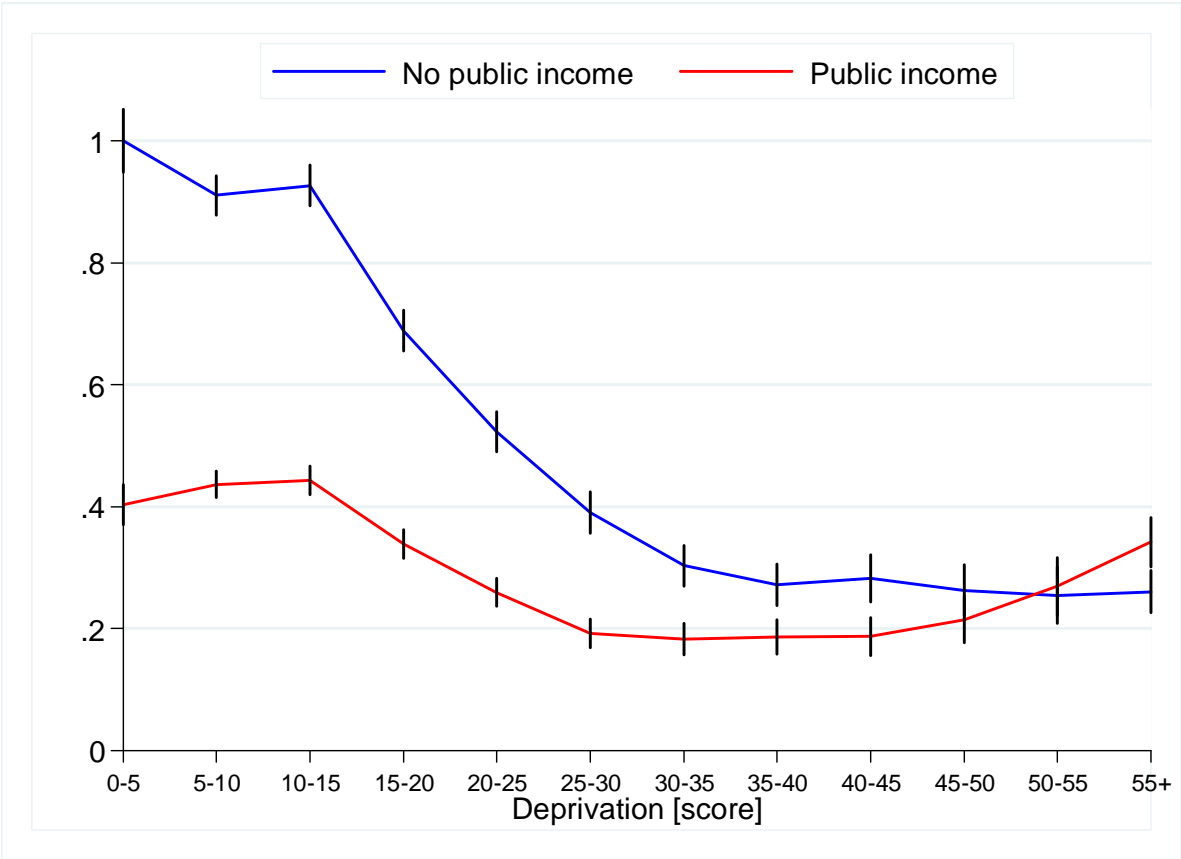
The distribution of third sector organisations and resources is of considerable interest to us and has featured in policy discussions. Of course it is well-known that charitable organisations are unevenly distributed and awareness was increased by Iain Duncan Smith, whose work for the Conservative party on the theme of ‘Broken Britain’ explicitly referred to so-called ‘charity deserts’ (Conservative Party, 2008). It is not difficult to see why maps of the distribution of charities would give rise to such a view, since for England there is a very sharp contrast in the ratio of organisations to population between a prosperous rural South and a disadvantaged post-industrial north. But this raises as many questions as it answers: the pattern of charities reflects an historical inheritance; charities may not spend money in areas in which they are registered, and there are several ways of apportioning the distribution of charitable expenditure between geographical areas; there is a distinction between spending by charities and spending of charitable resources; some flows of charitable funds, such as expenditure in universities on academic research supported by charitable trusts, do not appear in the accounts of registered charities; there are possibilities of double counting (e.g. counting grants from foundations to charities). These questions are taken up in a separate publication (Mohan, 2011a) and further work will be carried out on the distribution of the various kinds of third sector organisation. As an illustration, I briefly describe an innovative use of survey data which looks specifically at organisations which operate at the neighbourhood scale; the methodology and findings are described in Clifford (2011).

A challenge which confronts us in mapping the distribution of third sector resources is that we lack detailed information about the geographical scale at which organisations operate. The NSTSO, however, asked questions about whether respondent organisations were working at the neighbourhood, local authority, county-wide, regional, national or international scales. The great majority of organisations said that they only operated at one scale but a wide range of possible combinations was observed. Over two fifths of respondents said that they operated at the neighbourhood scale, which prompted us to analyse the characteristics and distribution of these organisations. A fine-grained analysis is possible, because we know both the local authority in which organisations are based, and the Index of Material Deprivation (IMD) (banded in successive increments of five points on the index). By cross-referencing these two pieces of information we can estimate the numbers of people who live in neighbourhoods with given characteristics (e.g. how many

people live in areas with an IMD of 5 or less – which would be among the most prosperous neighbourhoods in the country). By estimating the numbers of organisations in those areas we can then compute ratios of organisations to population.

The following graph shows some initial results. The vertical axis is standardised to a score of 1, representing the highest ratio of organisations to population. The horizontal axis is simply the IMD. Any area with a score of 45 or higher would be in the 10% most deprived communities in the country on this measure. Given the interest in the dependence of the sector on public funding, we have also presented information on whether or not organisations receive funds from the public sector. The broad picture is very clear: there are over 2.5 times as many organisations who say they work at the neighbourhood scale in the most prosperous neighbourhoods in the country compared to those in the most disadvantaged areas. For those that do not receive public funding, there is then a gradient in which the ratio of organisations to population declines as the IMD increases. In the most deprived areas there are relatively few organisations but a notable feature is that the balance between those receiving public funding and those which do not has shifted substantially. The majority of neighbourhood organisations in the most deprived areas of the country say they receive some money from the public sector (the survey question does not allow us to estimate how much they get). Interestingly, however, on a population basis, larger numbers of organisations in the most prosperous areas actually receive public funding than is the case in the most deprived areas, although the difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 1: Local organisations – prevalence of neighbourhood organisations by level of deprivation



In a forthcoming paper we present more details, breaking the figures down by other characteristics such as legal form, social purpose, or size of organisation (Clifford, 2011). The survey only covered regulated third sector organisations, but the findings suggest that the capacities of the third sector vary very substantially from one neighbourhood to the next: there are simply many more organisations in the most prosperous parts of the country. This is highly relevant to spatially-targeted initiatives like Communities First, which seek to support the establishment and growth of organisations in areas where they are currently lacking.

The civic core: the multidimensional world of voluntary activity

Much of the discussion about volunteering and pro-social behaviour focuses on headline figures – as is evident from the Giving White Paper with its encouragement to raise the proportion of the population volunteering or giving money to charity. But we have taken a step back from that and looked at the way we measure voluntary activity and at some apparent anomalies in the results. Methodology is destiny in this area – in other words how you define your topic will constrain the answers you get. Even apparently small differences in question wording and sequencing – whether volunteering is explored in relation to leisure activities, or whether it is investigated in relation to work; whether questions are phrased in terms of ‘unpaid help’ or ‘unpaid work’ – have a discernible influence on the results reported (Staetsky, 2011; McCulloch, 2011). Neither of these are wrong – it depends on the question under investigation. We have also been looking at possible anomalies in the reporting of information. Thus in the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) there have been questions about volunteering at two-year intervals since the mid-1990s but there is an unexpected spike in the recorded rate in 2002, which we have attributed to changes in the instructions given to respondents for that year. Likewise there are problems with the National Child Development Study (NCDS), which records volunteering at the ages of 16, 23 and 50 for those born in 1958; however, there is a social gradient in responses at the age of 16 which is the reverse of that found in comparable volunteering datasets and we advise caution in using it.³

Even if we agreed on how to measure voluntary activity, a focus on the headline rate (e.g. proportions of the population who volunteer) is very partial. There are many things that people do that contribute to the functioning of households and communities and unpaid help to voluntary organisations is only one of them. It makes more sense to analyse combinations of activities – who does what sort of activities, and who does how much of them, separately and together. This is why we have looked at the idea of a ‘civic core’, following Reed and Selbee’s (2001) Canadian study. We analyse data on unpaid help given to organisations, donations of money to charity, and participation in civic associations, and we look not just at the proportion of the population engaged in them, but at the amount of effort they contribute. There is some international comparative work on this, for Canada, but no British study to date.

The Citizenship Survey asked questions about the amounts of money people have donated to charity in the preceding four weeks, the hours of unpaid help they have given to organisations or groups, and the numbers of associations of which they are a member. On each of these dimensions we rank respondents in descending order by the amount of effort they have given, and cumulate the

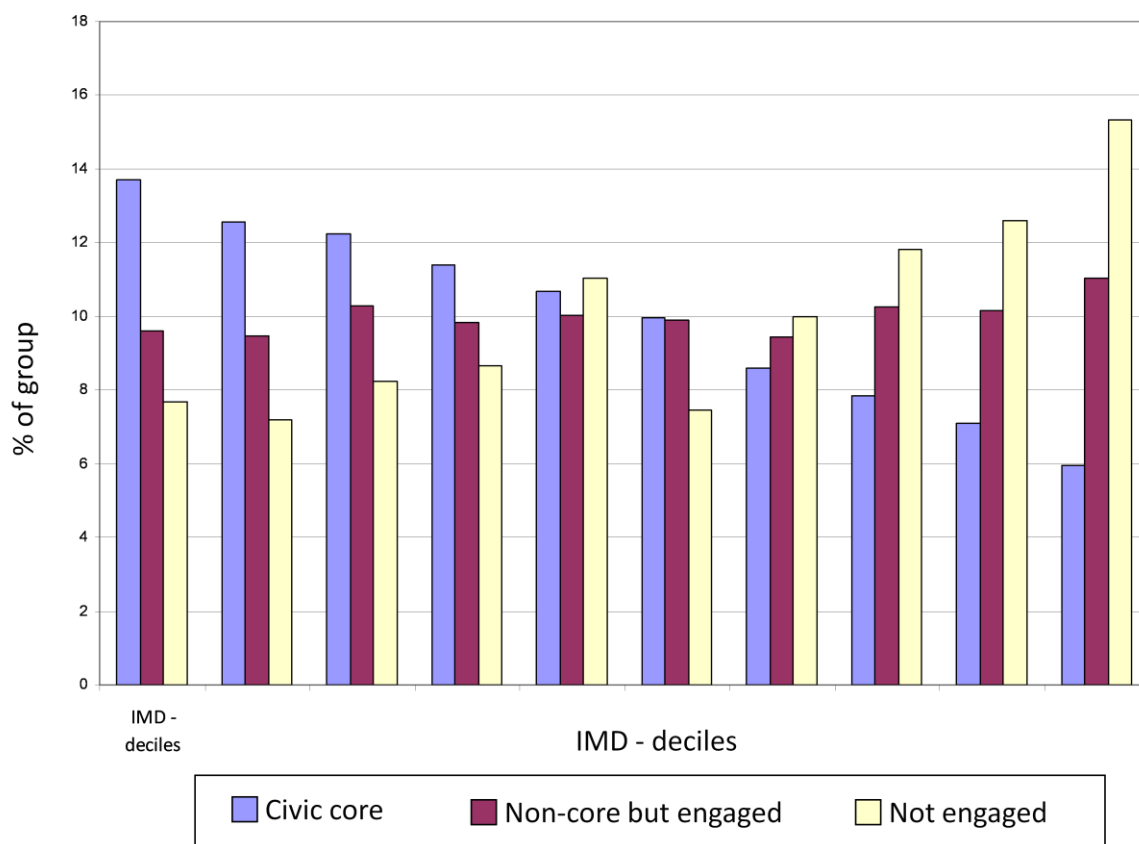
total amount of effort given. We have a cut-off point for membership of the core groups which is the level at which they are part of a group which collectively contributes two thirds of the total. For example, in one wave of the Citizenship Survey, the total reported hours of voluntary effort was 66,053, from 5,317 individuals, and the threshold value that would qualify a respondent for membership of the core is just under 4 hours per week. For charitable giving it was around £30 a month. Using these figures we can analyse two things: firstly, the extent to which people are engaged in society across one or more dimensions of effort; secondly, the relative amounts contributed by different groups of the population.

The first point to note is that we do not have a major problem of complete disengagement. Reports in the survey suggest that only around 7-8% of the population give no money to charity, provide no unpaid help to organisations or groups, or do not participate in any associations. Conversely, at the other end of the spectrum, relatively small subsets of the population contribute a very substantial share of effort. Following the methods used by Reed and Selbee (2001, 765-6), I define a 'primary' core, who are in the core on at least two dimensions, and a 'secondary' core (core on at least one dimension). The primary core is just over 7.6% of the population, while the secondary core comprises a further 23.9% of the population. In total, this 31% of the population provides 87% of volunteer hours, 79% of charitable giving, and 72% of civic participation. These findings are broadly comparable with the respective shares reported in Reed and Selbee (2001). Effort is concentrated in the primary core; this subset of people provide 49% of volunteer hours, 40 % of charitable giving, and 22% of civic participation. In contrast the remaining 63% of the population account for 13%, 21% and 28% of unpaid help, charitable giving and civic participation.

There are some fairly consistent and expected social gradients in the characteristics of these groups. Compared to the non-core and disengaged groups, the civic core is composed of people who are more likely than their counterparts in other groups to be middle-aged, have higher education qualifications, are owner occupiers, actively practice their religion, and have lived in the same neighbourhood for at least 10 years. Some demographic groups are very heavily engaged indeed. For example over 60% of middle-aged females with higher education qualifications would be counted as part of the 'civic core'. Unfortunately these account for a relatively small proportion of the population, implying that increasing the rate of engagement across-the-board will be needed if there is to be a substantial growth in pro-social behaviours and in the amount of effort contributed.

Defined in this way, the groups of the population are unevenly distributed, reinforcing the theme about geographical variation in the capacity of communities. If the civic core is dominated by those who are highly educated, owner occupiers and middle-aged, we would expect such variation. Figure 2 shows the distribution of the various groups by level of deprivation. There is a strong gradient here with 14% of the main core group most likely to be found in the most prosperous 10% of localities while, conversely, only 6% of them are likely to be living in the most disadvantaged areas. The message for advocates of the 'Big Society' is that this calls for careful thought about how we match needy communities with people who have the skills and time to contribute voluntary effort. Against a background of growing social segregation, that might not be straightforward.

Figure 2: The civic core – distribution of core and non-core groups by IMD



These statistics offer one reason why we should not focus solely on headline figures for reported rates of voluntary activity. A second reason why we should not do so comes from our analyses of longitudinal datasets which have asked questions of individuals repeatedly about their voluntary activities. We have analysed seven waves of data from the BHPS. Whereas the headline rate of volunteering is around 20% (it is lower in this survey than others because it asks a very narrow question about volunteering), over time something like twice the proportion will have volunteered at least once. This confirms something which we know intuitively – namely that voluntary action is something we dip in and out of depending on personal circumstances. Clearly, this raises further questions about the level of non-engagement in the population; in a lifetime perspective, it is probably much lower than cross-sectional surveys suggest. There are also some suggestions from the BHPS of cohort reductions in the level of participation in voluntary organisations – that is, people born in later cohorts being less likely to be engaged than those born earlier. This needs further work but if confirmed, these would also have implications for Big Society policies. Other work we are developing concerns the relationship between volunteering and social capital in communities, the relationship between volunteering and the distribution of voluntary organisations, and estimates of the total amount of voluntary effort contributed by people who volunteer in the ‘regulated’ third sector (i.e. organisations sampled in the NSTSO).⁴

In relation to current policy debates there are three issues of relevance from this work. Firstly, the 'true' level of engagement in the population is likely to be higher than that revealed by cross-sectional surveys. Secondly, people have mixed portfolios of engagement depending on circumstances – so a focus on just one dimension, like volunteering, may overlook the important contributions people make in other areas of social life. Thirdly, even if there are increases in the proportion of people engaged in pro-social behaviours, these may have a limited effect on the amounts of effort contributed. Take some potential developments flagged in the White Paper such as methods to encourage people to fit volunteering into their schedules by giving what have been referred to as 'slivers of time' – remote, perhaps electronically-delivered support to organisations or individuals. This might enthuse and engage some people, but by its very nature will not represent a substantial increase in volunteer input. But will people actually recognise and report this as volunteering? A challenge in monitoring voluntary activity through large-scale surveys is that differences in survey methodology and question design mean that we lack a consistent measure against which we can track changes. If the nature of voluntary activity is changing, we need to establish which trends are capturing the imagination of the public in order to be able to support them.

Dependence on public expenditure: which organisations are exposed to potential funding reductions, and where are they?

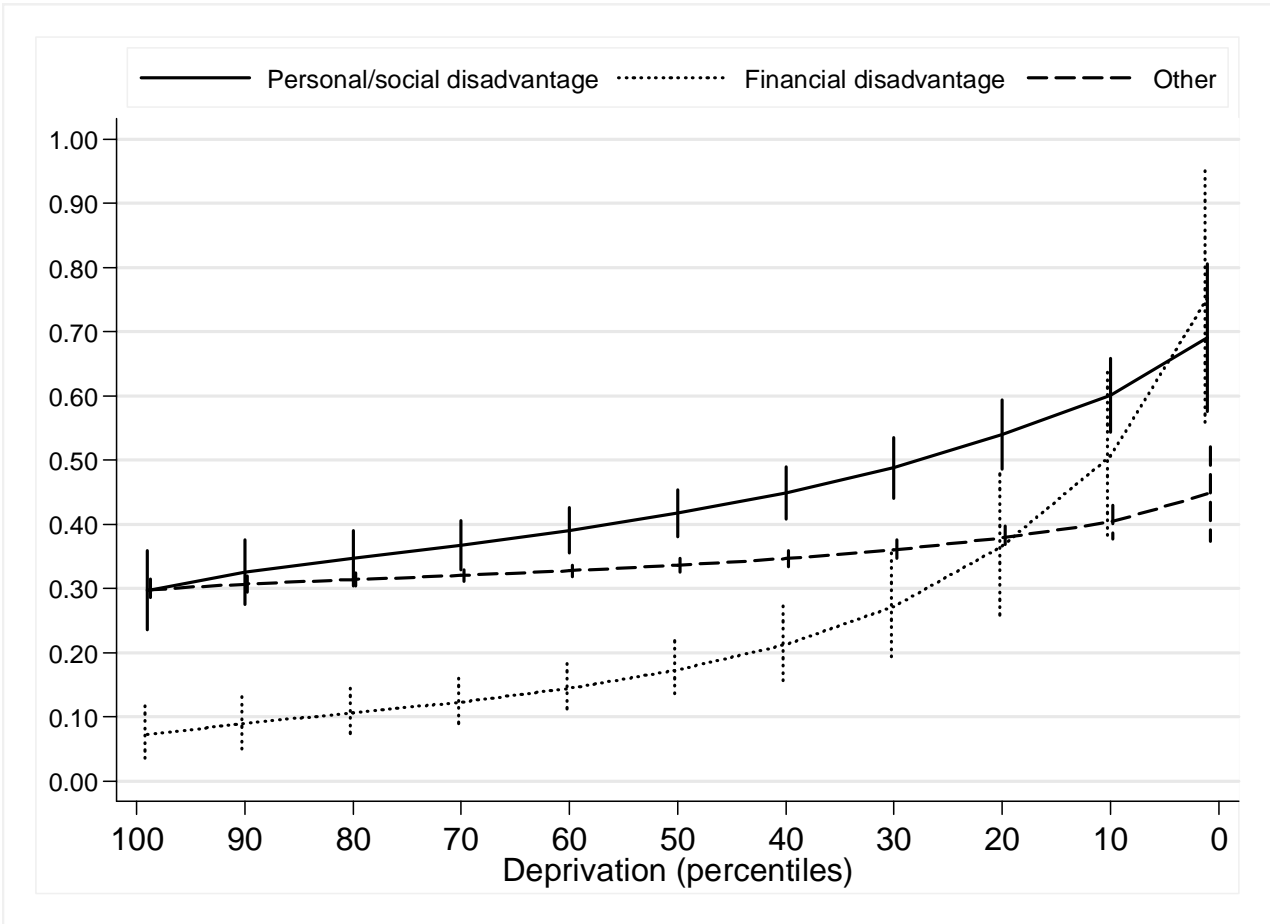
The extent of reliance of third sector organisations on public funding streams has been a source of much debate. Most analysis has focused on the headline figures of the amount of money going into the sector but much of this is concentrated in a relatively small number of organisations.

An alternative approach is to ask organisations themselves simple questions about their sources of income, rather than the amounts. This is more likely to prompt accurate recall – survey respondents are likely to be able to remember the names of the public sector organisations with which they have a relationship and categorise them accordingly, even if they are not able to recall the precise amounts of money they receive. The 2008 NSTSO adopted this approach and obtained returns from 48,000 third sector organisations including large numbers of small charities and other third sector legal forms which contained information about the range of different funding sources from which they drew, differentiated according to whether they received grants contracts. Because information is also available on numerous other characteristics of the organisations a very fine-grained analysis is possible of the relationship between organisational characteristics and area characteristics.

The headline figures from our work were that around 36% of third sector organisations said that they receive income from the public sector in some shape or form (Clifford, Geyne Rajme and Mohan, 2010). Combining the answers to another question indicated that some 14% of organisations regarded the public sector as their most important source of income. This may not objectively be their largest single source of income, but it is what respondents perceived as the most important to the success of the organisation. We found a very strong gradient between type of area – the more deprived the local authority, the more likely organisations were to be receiving public funding – and we also found interactions with other area characteristics. On the first point, a mapping of the extent to which respondents receive public funding showed a very strong contrast between large urban centres in the

north of England, plus some urban authorities in London and the south, where up to 50% of third sector organisations receive public funds, and conversely rural areas in southern England, where a much lower proportion of organisations drew on public funding. However there were also interactions with other area characteristics. Thus, for organisations classed as dealing with particular types of disadvantage (e.g. financial disadvantage) there was a particularly steep gradient in the relationship between deprivation and the likelihood of receiving public funding, in favour of the most deprived areas, but this gradient was much less evident for some other types of organisation. Figure 3 demonstrates this – as with figure 1, it shows information only for those organisations which operate at a neighbourhood scale.

Figure 3: Public funding – probabilities of receiving public income for organisations working at the neighbourhood level, by beneficiary group and deprivation



Note: spikes represent 95% confidence intervals

These kinds of interactions are only picked out through complex statistical techniques, which are capable of simultaneously taking account of the characteristics of organisations and the communities in which they are located .

This analysis is based on survey data available for 2008 (the 2010 survey data are not yet available) so it only captures exposure to public funding whereas public interest is focussed on the

effects of public spending reductions now. We have not attempted to gather information on those reductions systematically through quantitative surveys – we do not have the resources to mount these and in any case are sceptical about the quality of many open-access reports of such difficulties. In the long term, our panel data on third sector organisations will give us answers which have a more robust evidence base from which to judge the effects of economic change or public funding reductions.

The particular value of this survey may, ironically, lie less in the extent to which it fulfilled its original purpose (gathering information on the extent to which statutory authorities provided a supportive environment for the third sector), since it is highly likely that the response rates and the actual responses are conditioned as much by characteristics of organisations as by the characteristics of places. This needs further work, but we would urge caution in any attempt to use this survey as some sort of ‘barometer’ of enthusiasm for, or of the environment for, the ‘Big Society’. Nevertheless, this survey provides very fine-grained information on where organisations work, what they do, the mix of funding they receive, and the numbers of and balance between volunteers and paid staff (for example see Geyne-Rajme and Mohan, 2011).

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to give a flavour of the work going on in TSRC to enhance our understanding of the resources and capacities of the sector. A strong and consistent theme running through the evidence is that of the uneven distribution of resources between communities, which seem most likely to be explicable in terms of the underlying social and economic characteristics of places rather than variations in individual dispositions between places. The extent to which such disparities widen or narrow over time will be an important focus for research.

This will raise challenges in terms of the available data. It is unlikely that detailed local authority level measures will be available, much less anything below that geographical scale. There have been surveys of volunteering for local authorities, such as the Place Surveys, but notwithstanding their enthusiastic use by some analysts (e.g. Keohane et al., 2011) these surveys had weaknesses and have now been dropped anyway. With the cessation of key resources such as the Citizenship Survey, it remains to be seen what plans the government has to monitor the extent of engagement in volunteering and charitable giving.

There are nevertheless a range of potentially useful developments. TSRC’s emphasis on and commitment to longitudinal data sources will mean that we will develop, at any rate for charities, a database that will continue to grow as we add new data from the Register of Charities. There will remain a need to obtain representative data on the relative scale of different income sources. In response, we have therefore established (in conjunction with NCVO) a data entry operation to capture information on a subset of around 10,000 charities stratified by region and size, which we intend to use as the basis for a panel dataset. With co-operation from the Charity Commission we are also gathering information from the accounts of a subset of very small registered charities.

Outside TSRC, the expansion of the BHPS (now renamed ‘Understanding Society’: see <http://www.understandingsociety.org.uk/>) to 100 000 respondents, and the introduction of questions about charitable giving as well as volunteering, will provide very detailed statistics about how

individuals combine their pro-social behaviours with other elements of participation as well as with paid work and unpaid care. Open data initiatives should increase the range of potential sources available to us, though as commentators with a longer track record in this field have pointed out, the classification of what constitutes a voluntary or third sector organisation by central government departments can be inconsistent, so the use of government databases to analyse flows of public funding to those organisations may not be without challenges.⁵ Technical change, such as the use of Web crawling and ‘data scraping’ techniques to gather information from third sector organisations reports and accounts, will also be of value and we will report separately on progress with the development of our databases. Other possibilities may open up through the use of routinely-gathered datasets and the ESRC has set up the Administrative Data Liaison Service (ADLS) (see www.adls.ac.uk) to facilitate efforts in this direction. Simultaneously TSRC is also taking forward its longitudinal qualitative work on a panel of organisations, investigating transitions over time and responses to the current difficult circumstances. In view of this, we feel confident that tracking variations in the distribution, resources and capacities of third sector organisations will form an important element of TSRC’s work programme.

Endnotes

¹ See forthcoming reports on the Northern Rock Foundation’s Third Sector Trends project, available from http://www.nr-foundation.org.uk/thirdsectortrends/tt_reports.html

² See <http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/Research/BelowtheRadarBtR/Micromapping/tabid/563/Default.aspx> for more information on our work on micro-mapping.

³ This draws on the work of Vicki Bolton, PhD student, and more information on this topic is available from her blog at <http://www.confoundingfactor.org/archives/145>

⁴ Contact TSRC directly for further information on this work.

⁵ See discussion between David Kane and Ian Mocroft at <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/networking-discussions/blogs/116/11/05/13/what-does-central-government-think-it-spends-voluntary-sec>

Links to datasets

More information about the key sources referred to in this paper can be found as follows:

British Household Panel Survey (now known as Understanding Society): www.understandingsociety.org.uk

Citizenship Survey: www.communities.gov.uk/communities/research/citizenshipsurvey

National Child Development Study: www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/text.asp?section=000100020003

National Survey Of Third Sector Organisations (now renamed the National Survey Of Charities And Social Enterprises): www.nscsesurvey.com

Place Surveys: www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/placesurvey2008

Register of charities: www.charitycommission.gov.uk/showcharity/registerofcharities/registerhomepage.aspx

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- Mohan, J. (2011b forthcoming) Is there a British 'civic core': what does survey evidence tell us about the overlaps between charitable giving, volunteering, and civic participation? TSRC working paper.

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- Staetsky, L. (2011) Individual voluntary participation in the UK: a review of survey information, TSRC Working Paper 6.

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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