promoting effective community action through research

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Dear Reader

I am fed up with inflated figures and sound bites that make things sound better than they really are. So I have to declare:

I didn't meet my self imposed target.

In February 2010 I said I would try to increase the number of readers of this bulletin via our website to 1000.

Today, we have 277 registered users who receive notification of the bulletin's publication.

This is far fewer than I had thought. It would be easy to inflate these figures as over the last year I have deleted manually over 1000 spam registrations. I could have easily met my target if I had counted every spammer who expressed an interest in "IBM keyboards." My initial estimate was based on the user figures of the website we received over the first few weeks and I had not taken into account the amount of spammers who had registered.

I need to be careful for the rest of this editorial not to sound like I am fishing for sound bites, because I am genuinely not disappointed by the figures.

The community we work with is small and diverse.

We now know for certain that our 277 registered users are from voluntary sector organisations, universities, local authorities, infrastructure organisations and from overseas. 75 of them have put their details on the website open to sharing their experiences and thoughts.

When ARVAC faced its funding crisis in 2006 we lost touch with many of the people we had previously worked with. Now for the first time we can again be confident that the community we try to help to build is again growing.

You are this community and you deserve nothing less than the clear and obvious truth.

That's how we do things here at ARVAC.

I am therefore grateful to Colin Rochester and Meta Zimmeck for their blunt assessment of the Compact and to Jonathan Paylor who reports from what was clearly a frank and open discussion of the future of volunteering research at the Institute for Volunteering Research. I am also grateful John Diamond for his thoughts about the Big Society conversation and to the four speakers at our annual lecture whose outspokenness and excellence I found inspiring.

277 registered users are fewer than I had expected. Yet a community of 277 outspoken and frank individuals discussing promoting and helping to develop effective and appropriate forms of research in or on community organisations are a force to be reckoned with.

I am glad to be a part of it.

Jurgen Grotz

(editor)

Inside this issue:

Colin Rochester and Meta Zimmeck

The Compact: We've lost it!

Reaction to the publication, in April, of the summative evaluation of the Compact we conducted with Bill Rushbrooke was, to say the least, mixed. On the one hand, those described by Jeremy Kendall as 'Compact enthusiasts' vociferously attacked our conclusion that it was 'in danger of being ignored to death'. On the other hand, those who felt that the whole enterprise was misconceived seized the opportunity to denounce the Compact as ineffective and toothless. Our report – *Use it or Lose it* – took a more agnostic view as we sought to understand why a policy initiative which was launched with such high hopes and which has survived for 13 years – an unconscionable length of time for a modern-day government policy – appeared to have achieved so little.

The Compact takes the form of an agreement between government and the voluntary and community sector published in 1998 which was intended to change the nature of the relationship between the two parties and establish a set of 'rules of engagement' through which they could interact. It had its origins in a recommendation from the Independent Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector chaired by Professor Nicholas Deakin which became a commitment on the part of the incoming New Labour Government in 1997. By any standards, it was an innovative and ambitious statement of policy which was intended to usher in a 'new approach to partnership .... based on shared values and mutual respect'.

Since 1998, both government and the voluntary and community sector have committed political, reputational and moral capital and considerable resources to the task of implementing the Compact. Despite this investment and a widespread view that the Compact was a 'good thing' it has reached a low ebb and its future is bleak – in our view, it is a dead duck.

One important explanation for this gap between aspiration and achievement can be found in the way in which the policy was implemented. We identified five areas where the 'architecture of implementation' proved inadequate.

Firstly, political leadership at ministerial level was weak and inconsistent. There have been eleven different ministers with responsibility for the sector since 1998. They were mainly of junior rank – either 'on the way up' or 'on the way out'. They tended to have a wide range of responsibilities of which the Compact was just one. And their terms of office were too short for them to make a difference:

Secondly, the support ministers received from the unit within government responsible for the Compact (successively, the Voluntary and Community Unit; the Active Community Unit; the Office of the Third Sector; and the Office for Civil Society) was limited. The unit changed its head even more frequently than its name. It was chronically under-resourced and over-stretched and curiously lukewarm about the Compact.

Thirdly, the equivalent body on the voluntary and community sector side of the relationship – successively the Working Group on Government Relations; the Compact Working Group; and Compact Voice – also lacked resources. The Working Group only employed its first member of staff six months after the Compact was signed, and the current body – Compact Voice – manages on a government grant of £350,000 a year. There are also important concerns about the legitimacy of its claim to be the 'voice of the voluntary sector'.

In 1998 Sir Kenneth Stowe was clear that 'there is in England … no single body that in any sense represents the whole of the VCS' and sought legitimacy for his Working Group by conducting an extensive multi-layered process of consultation. Today Compact Voice, its board controlled by the national 'infrastructure organisations' allocated places as of right, has increasingly asserted the claim to speak for the sector without any obvious consultative underpinning (blogging does not count).

Fourthly, when government belatedly identified the need for a Commissioner for the Compact (2006) and a Commission (2007) which would have the responsibility of taking implementation forward and adequate resources for the task, it failed to ensure its permanent and independent status – the duty to report directly to Parliament and powers to make inquiries and demand information about breaches. According to its chief executive, the Commission was independent ' because we have been instructed to be by the government'. Without the protection afforded by 'powers', the Commission quickly fell victim to the Coalition's 'cull of the quangos'.

Finally, the mechanisms for liaison and accountability among the three players in implementation, which were never well-defined or robust, were neglected to the point of vanishing. The key component was the Compact Annual Meeting at which government and the sector (later the Commission as well) met to review progress and agree the next steps in the implementation process. This has ceased to be a mechanism for joint scrutiny and has become a public relations exercise and an opportunity for networking. The eleventh meeting, which should have taken place in February of this year, has not been scheduled.

These weaknesses were exacerbated by the volatility of the wider political environment in which the Compact operated. The optimistic days of 1997, when policy was seen to be driven by a vision of partnership, gave way to increasingly top-down, target-driven programmes based on prescription rather than trust. In the process, the policy model of partnership with the voluntary and community sector gave way to contracting and commissioning. And a plethora of new initiatives – such as Local Strategic Partnerships – displaced local Compacts as the main or only way of managing the relationship between local authorities and the voluntary sector in their areas.

So, what of the future? The last chance of putting the implementation of the Compact on a satisfactory footing disappeared with the Commission. A number of strands in government policy including cuts in public spending, which are undermining the activities of the sector, particularly infrastructure organisations; the localism agenda, which will transform the institutional arrangements at local government level; and changes to health care and the opening up of service delivery to 'any willing provider', which offer opportunities mainly to the largest organisations, will create a completely new environment for the sector. In the circumstances it may be time to lay the Compact to rest and look at the relationship between the state and the sector from a completely new – and more cynically realistic - perspective.

Colin Rochester and Meta Zimmeck are consultants with Practical Wisdom R2Z Research Consultants

Jonathan Paylor

Exploring the future of volunteering research

Since its creation in 1997, the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) has carried out numerous research projects, exploring all aspects of volunteering. While this has helped constitute a large body of work which continues to inform volunteering policy and practice, it would be imprudent to suggest that there are no major gaps in research. In the wake of recent government policy, researchers are also facing new challenges and are needing to engage with emerging complex issues. Indeed, the government's vision of a big society has pushed volunteering higher up the political agenda. At the same time, however, public spending cuts have led to a number of financial difficulties for the voluntary sector and research organisations, exemplified by major surveys such as the Citizenship Survey being cut, and reduced government funding to numerous voluntary sector organisations.

It is within this context that, on the 26th May 2011, IVR hosted a roundtable discussion where an invited group of researchers, as well as funders and practitioners with an interest in research, came together to discuss the future of volunteering research. The event aimed to generate discussion around the current state of our knowledge of volunteering and to establish where the major research gaps are. The day also hoped to cultivate ideas and opportunities for future research and collaborative work.

The event resulted in numerous small group and whole group discussions, with conversation flowing down different paths and avenues. This article does not intend to present everything that was said, but rather point to some of the central themes to emerge from the day.

Gateways to participation

A significant theme to come out of the discussions revolves around the question of how and why people engage in volunteering. It was highlighted that such questions have underpinned a significant amount of research and provided the basis for a large body of literature. Attendees noted, however, that previous research has tended to focus on identifying an individual's motivation or how formal mechanisms promote participation. It was suggested that this tendency has often led volunteer participation to be viewed in isolation, detached from an individual's life course and the context which their lives are situated within. There were calls to address this by paying closer attention to how an individual's social environment facilitates or constrains their participation, and exploring how participation shifts over an individual's life history.

Fostering a critical approach

Reflecting another key research topic, much discussion focused on the impact of volunteering. Here attendees pointed to the large amount of research that has attempted to measure the positive effects of volunteering. While there were concerns about the difficulty of validating some of the claims that are made in such research, there were even greater concerns about the subsequent effect of focusing solely on the benefits of volunteering. Indeed, many felt that previous research has gravitated towards the benefits of volunteering, and subsequently, the negative consequences of volunteering, and issues relating to organisational processes, have frequently been neglected or even silenced. Much discussion revolved around the need to address this gap, and how independent research, driven by the researchers themselves, could foster a more critical approach.

Attendees pointed to a number of 'thorny' issues that have recently emerged within the volunteering field that require further exploration. For instance, it was noted that there has been an increase in instances where volunteers have voiced their dissatisfaction with their experience. Additionally, it was suggested that certain volunteering opportunities are not being taken by individuals, and proposed that this is a consequence of people being more self orientated and wanting instant gratification.

Engaging with the 'big society'

The need to engage with the negative and unintended impacts of volunteering fed into wider discussions around the 'big society'. In particular, it was noted that, as volunteering underpins much of the discourse around the 'big society' and moves to the forefront of government policy, there is a danger that volunteering is framed as a panacea for all society's ills. It was expressed that we need to recognise that volunteering cannot provide such a function and to not be blinkered by the proposed and potential benefits of volunteering.

Further discussion around the 'big society' raised a number of other issues that attendees felt needed to be engaged with, including tensions and complexities around volunteers replacing paid staff and individuals managing and delivering public services.

Methodology

One of the key points to emerge from the day was the need for researchers to engage more closely with methodology. Indeed, it was raised that there is limited literature which discusses the different methodological approaches used within the volunteering research field. Furthermore, it was noted that researchers have often failed to fully report on the methods they have used. To address these omissions, it was expressed that researchers should participate in deeper debate about the pros and cons of different methods, and make their methods transparent when reporting research, enabling the reader to judge the claims they are making.

Next steps: continued collaboration

The themes to come out of the discussions shed light on key research gaps and illuminate a number of new emerging issues that researchers need to engage with. This call for further research, however, is also set within the context of increasing financial challenges. Arguably, such constraints point to the need for collaboration between different organisations and researchers.

Reflecting this changing environment, the event in itself represented an encouraging appetite for collaboration, which is also shown in the research currently being carried out by some attendees, such as The Pathways through Participation project led by NCVO with IVR and Involve. Whilst such projects point to the possibilities for further collaboration, attendees discussed some of the barriers and issues to be addressed in order to foster further partnerships and joint projects. Most significantly, it was suggested that, rather than bidding for discrete projects, we need to shift towards a 'programme' approach. Here, attendees also identified the ESRC seminar series as a way to build up a 'programme'.

While we do know a great deal about volunteering, the event pointed to a number of major gaps in research that need to be addressed. This need for further research is even greater, as volunteering moves up the political agenda and new and different issues arise. The day represented a key first step in this ongoing and unfolding task.

Jonathan Paylor is a Research Officer at the Institute for Volunteering Research.

John Diamond

Learning from the Big Society conversation: a return to community action?

Since May 2010 I have been writing about the impact of the Coalition's plans on the voluntary and community sector through our blog at www.clps.org.uk. Through the discussions and invitations to talk at a number of events over the past year the following is a reflection on my learning:

REMEMBER THE CONTEXT:

The impact of the Cameron claim for a Big Society on the broader public cannot, I think, be underestimated. I am not one of those who dismiss it with a cynical or resigned shrug. I know from my own personal experiences that the Big Society and the setting up of the Coalition a year ago prompted more private discussions about politics since the Iraq War. I think that it is important to remember that Cameron was seeking to re-position the Tory Party and to seek to occupy some of the ground vacated by Labour in the wake of the collapse of confidence in both Brown and Labour following the "election that never was". I think, also, that Cameron was seeking to appeal to past Lib Dem voters too. And the other key part of the context was the impact of the banking and finance collapse. So whilst, some of us might have hoped for a return to more regulation, state intervention and a different politics (helped by the Obama victory in November 2008) what we got was much, much worse than a re-run of 1980s Thatcherism.

For the voluntary and community sector I think the impact of the Big Society and the cuts agenda reflects slightly different processes in play. There is - to coin a phrase - a different narrative here. An important part of this different narrative is the legacy of New Labour. I think that we need to remind ourselves of the intimate sets of relationships New Labour sponsored with the leadership of the Sector. And I know that the NCIA have been really key to discussing the consequences of these relationships and unchallenged ways of thinking. And I recommend their reports and website as very valuable alternative set of perspectives to the dominant discourse of New Labour. Why do I think this is important? One of the important trends over the past 20 - 25 years has, I think, been the extent to which the sector has become professionalised. It is not that I think it is irrelevant to promote, support and encourage critical thinking and knowledge and understanding. But, I think that we need also to locate these developments in a political a well as historical context too.

So for me the political context is about recognising that as the national (as well as the local or regional) leadership of the Sector were drawn into the national conversations with government and civil servants they became their points of reference and their peer group. Indeed we can see that at the regional level the creation of regional infrastructure bodies was about the need for Government Offices in the Regions to have someone to talk to on their terms. Thinking critically about these developments opens up the chance to think about how we might do things differently. And, of course, ARVAC itself comes from that tradition of being rooted in a particular way of seeing the importance of developing and supporting individuals and community groups rather than seeing our reference group as being the local or city wide infrastructure bodies.

An important legacy, for me, of New Labour is the dependence and inter-dependence of local VCS professionals (and leaders) on city hall or successive waves of regeneration money which have tied in activists into a particular way of seeing the world. What we need to learn from that experience is how to exercise (or find) our critical voice.

BIG SOCIETY AND A CRITICAL VOICE: OPPOSING THE CUTS - NEW ALLIANCES?

The potential offered by Cameron's Big Society was, I think, to seek to do two things. One was to remind a number of audiences that it could not be divorced from the cuts agenda. The announcement in October of the Comprehensive Spending Review was a very timely statement on the aims and values of the new Government. As we know from lots of examples and reports from a range of agencies (including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Third Sector Research Centre, and local VCS organisations and networks) the impact of the cuts on the Sector has been significant. And we are not yet half way through this period of cuts and retrenchment. We can expect it to get worse.

The second thing I think we can think about is how do we develop new alliances and new networks both to protect what we have but also to point to the consequences and gaps the state is leaving behind as it retreats? Developing new alliances which are oppositional is not difficult. But they have a very short shelf life. I was struck by those on the national march against the cuts earlier this year by how "traditional" it felt. But I have noticed how both on that march but also on some of the local ones I have attended in Manchester the usual suspects are absent. Indeed one of the first anti-cuts marches in Manchester was led by members of a community group.

But developing new alliances is a necessary but not sufficient condition to develop a longer term approach. I think that one of the real contributions ARVAC can make (through its members, conferences and networking) is to support work already underway which looks at alternatives. And part of this does have to involve drawing together trade union members (whether as activists or as formal parts of a new alliance). We need to think about how we develop these new relationships. And it is here that I think we go beyond just opposing the cuts. Opposition is important but so too is developing a new kind of conversation.

This may sound a bit like the Big Society. I think it is much more in the tradition of valuing local experiences and local voices. And it is about looking for different alliances from those understood, valued and legitimised by Cameron and the Coalition. The impact of the spending cuts and changes to health, welfare and social policy is such that it seems impossible to think how the values of solidarity, social justice and equality could be shared by our sector with those of the Coalition.

ARVAC CONFERENCE IN November

Later this year the ARVAC conference will be in Manchester. The theme of the conference has been adapted by a piece from the writer Sivanandan. In 1989 he drew upon the literature which has informed and is informed by radical community work practice. His observations provide I think a powerful call for us to think about what we do and how we engage in this process of coalition building and being explicit about challenging power:

"...to open one's sensibilities out to the oppression of others, the exploitation of others, the injustices and inequalities meted out to others - and to act upon them, making an individual/local case into an issue, turning issues into causes and causes into movements and building in the process a new political culture, new communities of resistance that will take on power, capital and class."

Professor John Diamond works in the Centre for Local Policy Studies at Edge Hill University (Lancashire), UK.

REPORT
ARVAC ANNUAL LECTURE
Power and Knowledge creation: towards a theory of user control and community integration in voluntary action research.

Who is in charge of knowledge and knowledge creation in the voluntary and community sector? Universities? If so who within universities? Voluntary Sector Organisations? Umbrella organisations such as NCVO? Service users and volunteers? How do they do it? Where is knowledge kept? How do we know it is reliable? These were some of the many questions the discussions during this year's ARVAC lecture was seeking to address .

ARVAC was again very fortunate to be able to attract four eminent speakers to discuss the questions surrounding Power and Knowledge creation.

Ian Bruce, the founder of the CASS Business School's Centre for Voluntary Sector and Not for Profit Management and co-founder of "Knowhow Nonprofit' described the work of this free resource.

Bernard Harris, Professor of History of Social Policy at the University of Southampton provided the historical context.

Andy Benson and Angela Ellis Paine had been asked to respond to the first two speakers.

Andy Benson, the co-founder of the National Coalition for Independent Action, provided insights into the politics of power and its effects on knowledge creation.

Angela Ellis Paine, a Research Fellow at the ESRC Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham, concluded the discussion with her suggestion that

"those of us who are involved in research with the voluntary and community sector out of a desire to see some kind of change …[have a] responsibility … to think hard about how users are involved both in the creation and the consumption of knowledge."

If you haven't been able to join us you can listen to the presentations again on our website. Try it, they are fantastic.

http://www.arvac.org.uk/power-and-knowledge-creation

Fostering these discussion is one of the key reasons for ARVAC existence, as otherwise they may not happen. Why is it important that they happen you may ask? Andy Benson provided the answer to this when he quoted Polly Toynbee: "*there is a point when public servants and charities alike need to set aside self interest and speak up for the public good*".

ARVAC can help to facilitate this. We are entirely volunteer run to offer a communication hub for all those interested in research in the Voluntary and Community Sector, speaking up for the public good offering clear and obvious points, not soundbites.

We are grateful to the speakers who gave their time for free. We also rely on and are grateful to the wonderful host of this year's event, The Salvation Army and to the Community University Engagement East for their support.

If you missed it this year follow us on twitter and we will let you know when the next ARVAC Annual Lecture will be. We are already planning it.

Temple, B & Moran, R (eds) (2011) *Doing Research with Refugees: Issues and guidelines*, The Policy Press, The University of Bristol

Reviewed by Gayle Munro

This edited volume, based on a two-year ESRC seminar series, 'Eliciting the views of refugee people seeking asylum', is a collection of papers built around the 'widely accepted premise, built into government policies, that involving service users in planning and implementing service provision is beneficial for all' (p.3). The ten papers included in the volume discuss a range of themes connected to conducting research with refugees or those seeking asylum, with almost every paper devoting some considerable discussion to sampling and methodological considerations, the dilemma of offering incentives for participants, the challenges of wedding together research with policy and practice and overcoming real or perceived barriers to participation. The volume is, in my opinion, well-edited, many of the themes of the series being treated differently in each paper and yet holding together well as a collection of papers being based on the same premise.

As a researcher who has conducted research with those at various stages of the asylum-seeking process, I particularly enjoyed the methodological discussions in each paper. All too often methods are skipped over in papers with the authors impatient to discuss the findings, leaving the reader with more questions than answers, but this volume was a happy exception to this with sufficient discussion being paid to the challenges of methodological rigour, particularly involving interpretation (see in particular Temple and Edwards paper) - so much so that I wish I had been able to attend the seminar series on which the book was based to hear more!

Throughout the volume the contributors use striking case studies from their work to illustrate the arguments put forward, examples of which include Moran, Mohamed and Lovel's illustration of a Somali woman's way of communicating with her healthcare providers (pgs. 66-67) and Harris and Roberts' case study (pgs. 162-163) of a research interview which involved one (deaf) interviewee (with limited sign vocabulary) and the five other people participating in the interview, needed to ensure that the interview could be conducted successfully (Tamil-speaking interviewee's father, English-speaking researcher, English/Tamil speaking visually impaired interviewer, English/British Sign Language interpreter, deaf British Sign language/Tamil Sign Language project contact).

Many of the authors were keen to stress that their discussions involved anyone at any stage of the refugee process and not only those who are deemed by the UK Government to have refugee status. Indeed, the volume is dedicated to 'everyone who has been, or considers themselves to be, a refugee'. This position, whilst ethically sound, does however run the risk of inadvertently turning a blind eye to what will inevitably be the different needs of those involved at various stages of the asylum-seeking process. The harsh realities of the UK migration system unfortunately mean that the risk of destitution is going to be greater at different stages of the asylum process. Legal status, or a decision undertaken by a UKBA official, does inevitably have an effect on an individual's recourse to public funds and no amount of terminology flag waving by academics is going to change that harsh reality. There appear to be other contradictions in some of the discussions. The collection aims to answer the question 'can research also be empowerment?' (p.viii) and much discussion is paid to the 'methodological issue of giving "voice" to refugees' (p. viii).

And yet the editors acknowledge that presentations made by (refugee) speakers at the original seminar series had been replaced in this volume by other contributions: '[…], writing can be daunting and writing for academic publishers is not the same as writing for a general audience. There is an academic language and ways of arguing that takes time to learn. We have found that refugees and service providers, in our seminars found it easier to speak about the issues than to reproduce them in writing for an academic audience' (p. 4). I did find this apparent contradiction rather uncomfortable and, despite the stress on participatory approaches throughout the volume, found the at times 'us and them' language less than empowering. There appeared to be a belief that you can either be an academic or a refugee with no acknowledgement that it is possible to hold the status of both. At this point I would have liked to have seen a discussion of the work of CARA (Council for Assisting Refugee Academics) or at least a reference to their existence.

Similarly I felt a little uncomfortable with the apparent insistence on the part of some contributors that employing a refugee as an interviewer in an action research project seemed to be enough to 'tick the box' that the project could be considered to be inclusive and empowering to participants (p. 23) or that having a family member act as interpreter would automatically be comforting for participants (p.86). Tait (p.138) makes the counter-argument that where 'inter-tribal and inter-clan rivalries have been the cause of flight' refugee interviewers would need to be chosen with caution.

I welcomed the discussions by several contributors over sampling and, in particular, so-called representative sampling, i.e. who could be considered to be representative (pgs. 14-15, 138 – 139). However, by the same token, I would question the claims made that smaller-scale qualitative studies are necessarily 'authentic' as long as they are conducted by someone of the same ethnicity. If representation is difficult to determine then surely authenticity is equally so? I also felt that, ethically, some purposive sampling frames as referred to by one contributor (pgs. 85-86) would need to be approached with some caution: by including only some of those refugees who had volunteered to participate, the researcher would need to be careful not to create potentially even more disenfranchisement amongst those not chosen to participate.

Several contributors referred to research fatigue on the part of refugees and those seeking asylum (pgs. 136, 137, 149) and this would appear to be especially pertinent in any project classed as 'action research' where some influence on policy and practice is a natural expectation. Moran, Mohamed and Lovel in their paper on Somalis living in Manchester highlighted this with particular clarity: 'When we developed this research, we were all very optimistic about its possibilities […] The work formed the bedrock for progressing the perspectives of Somali people within the city […] However, in the main, the situation has remained static or has even degenerated […] While there have been a number of positive, but very small, outcomes from our work, there is still no community centre for members of the Somali population in Manchester' (p.71). Harris and Roberts in their work on disabled refugees refer to the short-term nature of research contracts on offer (p.165) and this of course, often depending on the ever-decreasing availability of funding in the current financial climate is going to mean more pressures and increased expectations on both practitioners and researchers. It was in some ways with regret that I read Kirsteen Tait's paper, documenting, amongst other things, the extensive work of ICAR (Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees) (pgs. 133-153). Since the seminar series and the writing of the paper, ICAR was faced with near closure when funding was removed by its then host, City University. ICAR has fortunately been allowed to continue its work through the hosting of the Runnymede Trust but this serves as one example of the pressures that the sector is under in today's climate of spending cuts.

As all service providers are coming under more pressure from funders to quantify outcomes against investment, where does the role of research fall into budget-makers' decision-making processes? How can we measure the outcomes of action and participatory forms of research to ensure the continuation of such processes despite the additional pressures on funding?

Gayle Munro is Research Manager at The Salvation Army.

Colin Rochester, George Campbell Gosling, Alison Penn and Meta Zimmeck (Editors) (2011) *Understanding the Roots of Voluntary Action: Historical Perspectives on Current Social Policy.* Sussex Academic Press: Brighton and Portland, Oregon.

Reviewed by: Fiona Poland

This seems to be an excellent time to question why various initiatives in voluntary action are often presented by policymakers as having the merit of being "novel and innovative". Perhaps this is because some may be seeking to claim credit for the earlier ideas and efforts of others, or to break up a pattern of existing groups and alliances. In introducing this stimulating collection of short historical reports on diverse aspects of voluntary action in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Colin Rochester argues against the trend for debates around voluntary action to ignore the often hard-won lessons of its past. The insights offered here strongly demonstrate how, if the voluntary and community sector sets aside such rich knowledge, it denies itself a source of analytical power for policymaking to engage with many current challenges. These chapters, based on papers presented to the Third International Conference of the Voluntary Action History Society have real relevance for key themes being increasingly re-presented to today's voluntary sector. These are reflected in the four themes which frame the book's contents: the moving frontier (between the state and voluntary action); the impulses ("from above" and "from below") to voluntary action; organizational challenges; issues of continuity and change. The authors whose work is brought together by this editorial team, combine an impressive depth of scholarship with often long-term involvement in the practical details of voluntary action. As voluntary groups now find themselves having to orientate themselves in a swiftly changing landscape of relative expectations of and value to state-voluntary support and roles in meeting social, welfare and educational needs, many issues shown in this book as being tackled in earlier times, take on fresh relevance. These help call into question any easy assumptions about the independence or otherwise of state and voluntary sector structures and resources as, for instance, welfare services can be seen to have been embedded within mutually-shaping critical dialogues. So, the inadequacies of charitable provision came under particular scrutiny from the 1930s and 40s, as concepts of need broadened according to Wright's account of the emergence of social work and Social Work Departments in the 1960s and their critique in turn by more policy-oriented voluntary organisations in 1970s and 80s.

Several narratives, which show how creative solutions have been linked to critical debates may bring some encouragement to face today's dilemmas. Logan relates how women's struggles for inclusion in work and political representation may have helped motivate and energise their considerable contribution to policy, management and innovation in the criminal justice system.

Some of the threads that run across chapters are intriguing. One importantly concerns the changing forms of philanthropic activity: traced by Penn in their evolution post-war into government-isomorphic service providers; Stewart's exploration of the underpinnings of the child guidance movement with funding from single Foundation providers, local churches and wealthy individuals; examinations by Cronin, Swain and Weeden respectively, of the parts played by individual entrepreneur Christian philanthropists as in the 1860s founding of convalescent homes in Scotland, those engaged in child rescue work and in Quentin Hogg's founding the polytechnic movement in the twentieth century; with Fowler's location of the origins of "scientific philanthropy" in the eighteenth century and then Breeze's closing chapter aptly reinforcing Rochester's introductory arguments. These very much question the case for any "new philanthropy" as so very new, given that its impulse to "rational answers" or origins in "entrepreneurship" have been repeated features of past voluntary action.

This book therefore offers many stories and insights from earlier challenging and no less complex times, which can be seen to have real resonance for a voluntary sector now seeking ways through testing restrictions on its resources, energy and action.

Fiona Poland is the current ARVAC Chair and is Senior Lecturer in Health and Society at the University of East Anglia.

INVITATION

ARVAC Annual Conference and AGM

Community Issues to Community Research to Community Movements: Making Connections

23 November 2011

AGM 11.30am – 12.30pm;
Conference 1pm – 4.30pm

Venue: Greater Manchester Council for Voluntary Organisations
St Thomas Centre, Ardwick Green North, Manchester M12 6FZ

For full information please see our website.

Attendance is FREE but places are limited.
Please register and book a place by contacting:
Ruth Selwyn-Crome on 01603 591561 or community@uea.ac.uk

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promoting effective community action through research

About ARVAC

ARVAC (The Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector) was established in 1978. It is a membership organisation and acts as a resource for people interested in research in or on community organisations.

We believe that voluntary and community organisations play a vital role in creating and sustaining healthy communities, and that research plays an essential role in increasing the effectiveness of those organisations involved in voluntary and community action.

We want to hear from you:

Please send us:

- News items
- Details of new publications, resources or websites
- Information about research in progress
- Meetings or events you would like us to publicise
- Comments or opinion pieces you would like to share with other ARVAC members

by e-mail to
j.grotz@roehampton.ac.uk