



Challenging the status quo: the role and place of Third Sector organisations

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Abstract

Purpose – The primary purpose of this paper is to explore the implications of a Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) Report published in June 2008 for the role of voluntary, community and faith (VCF) based organisations in supporting and developing networks of support and influence at the local level.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws upon the empirical data collected for one of the case studies in the JRF report and develops the conclusions drawn.

Findings – The roles played by key individuals in VCF organisations may “open” up access to services for refugee and asylum seekers but they may also inhibit access. Their significance as centres of influence and authority in a post-representative form of local democracy suggests that their role may have been under-estimated in the UK. At the same time, local state organisations are experimenting with devolved street based or neighbourhood focussed approaches and these twin developments raise issues of accountability and decision making.

Research limitations/implications – The findings and the paper point to the need for further grounded research which is situated in localities and can examine the ways in which local state agencies have experienced the processes of change and dislocation.

Practical implications – It illustrates a number of examples of innovation at a local level which invite an examination of the replication in other neighbourhoods.

Originality/value – The paper draws upon the direct experience of local community facilitators and explores ways in which they can influence change.

Keywords Regeneration, England, Voluntary welfare organizations, Communities, Religion, Partnership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The relationship(s) between public and governmental agencies, non-governmental bodies (in the UK this is often described as the voluntary and community sector – VCS) and refugee and asylum seekers is a complex one and can be shaped by a variety of assumptions and competing political choices and decisions. This paper draws upon a recently completed study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Blake *et al.*, 2008) which explicitly attempted to locate those relationships within a policy and practice framework which took account of the changing structures and processes of local governance in England and the profoundly important political context within which the needs of asylum seekers and migrants were or were not being met.

These issues are not (as the paper explores) marginal to the needs of the individuals concerned nor are they on the policy periphery of local government and public and welfare service providers but they can be experienced as such to individuals and the communities within which they are situated. A key finding of our research was that among voluntary, community and faith (VCF) based groups the material conditions and lived experience of asylum seekers and migrants were perceived to be marginal to the local political institutions. And that in some places this sense of marginality and exclusion from the “mainstream” was real and significant.

While, as the paper will seek to discuss, these feelings of marginality and distance are important there was evidence of how VCS and faith-based groups sought to provide



a supportive route or entry point into the existing “family” of welfare services and also how a number of public agencies did seek to engage with these agencies in a positive way. An observation we make in the report is that of course this relationship is a dynamic one. As a consequence, we can begin to observe examples whereby these informal networks become important sources of information and local intelligence for residents and how local state actors may seek to use these networks as a means of enhancing their own awareness and knowledge without changing the distribution of resources. This latter point (post-9/11, the London bombings and a series of urban disorders in northern UK towns) is well reflected in the contemporary policy debate on community cohesion and regeneration (Bennett, 2006; Cadell and Falk, 2008; Flint and Robinson, 2008; Sheibani, 2007).

For the purposes of this paper the intention is to reflect upon the policy and practice implications of the emergence of these informal networks and to reflect upon the extent to which they offer the potential of providing an alternative site of influence and power. The first part of the paper looks at the policy context within England and the policy/practice issues raised by the changing governance arrangements at a local level.

Framing the policy debate

A key policy theme of the UK government (post-1997 and the election of New Labour) has been the idea of “partnership” and, in particular, the need to expand and diversify the provider base of services to include the voluntary and community sectors (in the UK this label has been replaced by the description: the Third Sector). The idea of partnership and collaboration is clearly not a political neutral decision and it is important to reflect upon the language or discourse of collaboration and partnership as it is understood in the UK context.

It is quite possible (of course) to frame this part of the paper into an exploration of the competing theoretical (and organisational) models of “partnerships” and to examine the extent to which the particular examples selected do (or do not) meet the needs of residents and service professionals. The more important discussion is the one which shifts our attention to the underlying factors which have shaped New Labour’s social and economic policies post-1997.

There are five key elements or themes to the policy making processes over the past ten to 15 years in the UK. One aspect of these processes is the extent to which there is a continuity or a congruence between the social, economic and welfare policies of New Labour with those of the Conservative New Right’s agenda from 1979 to 1997. This idea of continuity has been explored in detail elsewhere (Carpenter *et al.*, 2007) and it is important to rehearse the policy and practice issues it has raised. An important aspect of the “continuity” analysis is the focus it places upon the role and function of the state (Davies, 2007).

The recasting of the state as an “enabler” rather than a direct provider of services has been a feature of New Labour. In particular, in the summer of 2007, a report from the Treasury sketched out the potential role and contribution of the Third Sector in the provision of services across a wide range of welfare/social functions. A part of this development called for a greater degree of contracting out to the Third Sector by public agencies and that this too required an increased level of activity in commissioning of services and the contracting arrangements.

It is in this context that we can begin to observe the ways in which New Labour have continued with the broad social and welfare policy agenda of the previous administration. The language and assumed practice of “partnership” and “collaboration” in this context

can be understood as part of the plurality of service providers and in the marketisation of services that both Labour and the Conservatives subscribe to. “Partnership” can, therefore, be understood as the need to develop services and provision which seeks to meet “needs” and that the location or “ownership” of such service provision is not relevant to the question of the quality of service offered or the extent to which it meets the requirements of those who have commissioned the service (Topping, 2008).

Another additional aspect of the “continuity” discourse is the stress placed upon the perceived failure of the welfare state – both to reform itself but also because it was seen to be dysfunctional (Diamond, 2007). This important (both politically and in terms of the institutional arrangements which have been put in place and the associated governance structures) development raises a whole set of practice/policy questions.

The claim that the welfare state and the institutions associated with its organisation and management were broken was shared across the political/ideological spectrum (Boddy and Fudge, 1984; Burgess *et al.*, 2001). More significantly perhaps the decades of the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a restructuring of the organisational, institutional and functional structures and systems for the management of the welfare state. We could argue that the emerging structures reflected the neo-liberal interpretation of what was considered appropriate and necessary for a post-industrial world (Harvey, 2000, 2005). It is this context that we need to locate the “partnership” debate. As Davies (2007) has argued in a seminal paper on the limits to partnership working the notion that such an approach has the capacity to effect progressive reform is seriously mis-guided. On the contrary, the organisational infrastructure of the welfare state reflects and promotes the values of the state. Thus, we should assume that the notions or concepts of “collaboration” and “partnership” do not sit in an ideologically neutral environment.

At the local level over the past 25-30 years in the UK the functions, structures and role of local government have undergone profound change. Since 1997 there has been a more explicit promotion of partnership working with the Third Sector and as a consequence the Labour Government has sought to facilitate such co-operation. In parallel to this development has been the experience of voluntary and community sector organisations. These agencies have themselves reflected the changing pace and culture of the state’s needs at a local and neighbourhood level as well as across communities of interest or identity (in which we might place faith-based groups).

The importance of voluntary sector groups or alliances of community organisations (including faith-based groups) was identified in the empirical research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Blake *et al.*, 2008). The significance of voluntary sector agencies (in the UK) as part of a network of practitioners or interest groups is not new. Since the late 1960s such organisations have been a well-established feature of urban regeneration programmes and since the 1980s part of rural regeneration initiatives too.

The political importance (at a local level) of ensuring the presence and contribution of the VCS is contested (Birch and Whittam, 2008; Chetty and Agndal, 2008). But the key point to make in this paper is the ways in which the VCS has become seen as a “legitimate” entity and providing a “voice” to local communities and residents. Part of the obvious on going exploration of the relationships between and within urban neighbourhoods is to examine the dynamics present around race and religion. The urban and placed based conflicts between the Black and minority ethnic communities and (increasingly) the activities of the far right have become more significant for national politicians in the wake of 9/11.

In this context, we can begin to see the importance of the VCS as an agency which has the potential to promote alternative voices, to highlight local and neighbourhood

based approaches and to reflect a positive sense of difference. They can, of course, be “captured” by those forces which wish to use them to promote their own sense of identity which denies the positive value of difference and diversity. The Third Sector is not a neutral political space as it is not (of itself) progressive or in tune with promoting values of social justice (Diamond, 2008; Purdue, 2007b).

At the same time we need to locate the debate on the role of the VCS (and faith based groups) in a political and social context which are themselves shaped by the nature of the local state and the ways in which the neo-liberal agenda gets “played” out at the local level. In the UK this concern has influenced the final key element in this section: the ways in which the impact of neo-liberalism has sought to ensure the co-option or collusion of local leaders in the values and processes of the local state. Thus, rather than promoting different or alternative voices the local state is more comfortable with voices which are congruent with its needs.

In summary, therefore, we can observe a number of key elements: the continuity in social and economic policies over the past 35 years; the growing importance and significance of the VCS as a direct provider of public services; the political significance of the “partnership” model and what that tells us of the social relationship(s) of the state to local agencies (and individuals); the dominance of the neo-liberal discourse on the failure of the welfare state; and the ways in which the social and economic dislocation of the 1980s onwards across matured capitalist societies has enabled the far right to emerge and its impact on the language and practice of liberal democracies.

Practice and policy questions raised by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) research

The fieldwork for the JRF research was undertaken in three sites: Coventry, Oldham and Newham. Each of the locations had different histories of migration, employment, patterns of settlement and responses to the recent increases in migration. Each of the different locations also had quite different patterns and practices associated with the voluntary and community sectors. These differences are, clearly, important to recognise and to acknowledge. To some extent they should be assumed but for the purposes of this paper they do reflect differences of response, organisational capacity, institutional awareness and engagement and, finally, different perceptions/expectations of what the local state can offer.

We assumed, at the start of our research, that one of the important changes taking place was: population churn – the movement of people from the EU and accession states, the inward increase of migration and asylum seekers into the UK and the nature of the response at a local level. We also assumed that the institutions and patterns of governance at a local level while changing did represent an element of stability and continuity. Thus, while the neighbourhoods were in “flux” – the agencies and institutions of the local state were able to provide access to services and support for local residents/communities.

The pattern of provision and experience across our three case study areas and our own reflection on the nature of the relationships at a local level required us to reassess our earlier model of churn vs stability and to modify it to capture the extent to which “churn/instability” was present across the relationships. In this context, we can assume that there is a risk that local institutions take on a role of “gatekeeper” or become relationship brokers. We wanted to explore that and we were sufficiently aware to expect that some VCS agencies would occupy that space: keeping individuals out and facilitating the access of some individuals/groups into the political/economic spaces available to them.

In the report, we note that we are not suggesting that the scale of resources available through these networked relationships is significant. Indeed one of the recommendations

contained within the report relates to the need to ensure that migrants and asylum seekers do secure additional support and resources. This issue of the “gatekeeper” role is more subtle here. It is a recognition of the fact that access to services including housing or education or welfare/health support has the potential to represent gaining a priority of services over other individuals and, as such, this can result in a dependent set of relationships with those who are the neighbourhood gatekeepers.

While this might appear to be focussing upon the negative aspect of the report’s findings it is important to point to the complex set of relationships which are present. In any set of relationships where the distribution or access to power/decision making is unequal we need to point to where this is present and to reflect upon its implications.

The fragmented sets of relationships between staff and local institutions of the state also revealed or indicated points of discontent or to the uneven nature of the relationships between service managers/workers and political decision makers. There has been a number of changes at the local level on the organisation and structure of decision making. A concern of the current UK Government has been with how resources are allocated or shared between different services which have overlapping needs or concerns. The introduction of local strategic partnerships (LSPs) which are an attempt to bring together different agencies and service providers with voluntary sector engagement represent an important attempt at reform. More recently, the UK Government has linked the delivery/ outcome of services with the setting of serviced led outputs or outcomes – these local area agreements (LAAs) are relatively new but also they represent additional pressure points on local agencies.

The engagement or participation of the VCS and faith-based groups in the deliberation associated with the setting of these LAAs represents another way in which local state actors/agencies seek to incorporate the values/preferences of local resident groups. The extent to which these developments can be seen as innovative or new reflects the extent to which there is scope or discretion at the local consultative level to influence the allocation of resources. Our research proposed that the LAA process should be used as a means of promoting the values of social justice and social inclusion.

The extent to which the LAA and the LSP as institutions or new forms of governance/management could be “captured” by the VCS also was dependent upon a number of issues including the skill, capacity and political awareness of the VCS. We suggested, in our report, that investing in the capacity of the VCS was a necessary pre-condition to realising a more socially progressive agenda. But clearly it is not sufficient. The extent to which the VCS can be “captured” remains another point for debate.

Issues and implications

We can shift the debate to a broader theoretical level. The potential of NGOs to lead on social reform and to promote such reform is an open question. We can imagine a set of possibilities in which we seek to cast the NGOs as places or sites of intervention. In doing so we are seeking to frame the potential of these institutions to act as independent agencies and to be capable of promoting particular social and political values. As the literature and policy practice experience tells us ensuring such independence of action is difficult (at best).

The policy/literature debates provide a number of potential learning points:

- the extent to which the local state can act independently and has the potential to promote a different social and political agenda to neo-liberalism (Wainwright, 2003);

- the significance of neighbourhoods as places of innovation and development and the extent to which local political institutions can act as semi-independent agents from the central state (Bennington *et al.*, 2006; Burgess *et al.*, 2001; Evans, 2007);
- the need to explore and to reflect upon the lived experiences of residents and practitioners across the public and voluntary sectors and to examine their sense of place as well as their sense of achievement or engagement – or not (Birch and Whittam, 2008; Gilchrist, 2004; Harrow and Bogdinova, 2006; Hay, 2008; Pierson, 2008; Smith, 2008);
- the extent to which we can look at trans national experiences and observe or reflect upon those experiences which are shaped by different institutions, forms of governance and expectations but indicate commonalities of experience which illustrate the trans national power of class, race and gender (Purdue, 2007a; Kohler and Wissen, 2003); and
- the power/influence of ideas of collaboration and partnership and our need to reflect upon their cultural/social base (Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Munro *et al.*, 2008).

This interpretation of the policy literature and its relationship to the research project cited is mine. The experience of listening to participants in the Oldham case study area, observing their interactions and relationships with key policy professionals and locating that specific and spatially defined sets of relationships in over 25 years of analysis the following observations suggest that

The processes associated with developing partnerships or collaborative relationships require negotiation of trust based relationships. Collaboration represents much more than co-operation or defining systems for service co-ordination and integration. Collaborative practice does develop from quite sophisticated and informed sets of relationships including: negotiation, an awareness of differences in power and status, a willingness to share authority and a willingness to revisit these elements because differences in power/status and authority reassert themselves if they are not monitored and checked. These relationships may, therefore, exist as temporary alliances or as networked sets of relationships where positions of trust and decision making are shared or agreed on a separate basis – issue by issue.

The potential of Faith Based initiatives revealed across the project but especially in Oldham illustrates many of these propositions in practice: establishing an inter/multi faith forum as part of an attempt to promote/celebrate religious toleration and awareness does not, of itself, represent anything new or innovative. The particular feature of this forum in Oldham which seemed to point to the potential of the VCS to provide space for innovative practice was its work with migrant workers.

In their work with migrant workers and asylum seekers the forum illustrated a number of the elements outlined in the earlier sections of this paper: the forum provided “space” for the development of local networks of informed practitioners and individuals who supported individuals and families, provided access to legal advice and support, provided housing and raised money for food, clothing and emotional as well as practical support. As a network they were highly organised, including individuals for whom this particular activity was informed by an explicit set of personal and ethical values. They were also involved in a wide range of associated

activity including promoting anti-racism and social justice (through support for Fair Trade campaigns) as well as seeking to influence the local political institutions.

They provided support for and opportunities for anti-fascist activity as well. The activities of the far right British National Party in the area were countered both by political activity as well as the activities of these networks. In this sense we can see the emergence of post-representative politics. The practice, experience and activities of the Forum and its associated networks do provide an insight into an emerging new kind of local politics. The questions are the extent to which these are signs of something new or whether they are a reaction to very specific sets of processes.

As the literature cited above suggests the extent to which the local state can act independently is open to interpretation and argument. The claims or examples cited by Wainwright (2003) which are based upon a social justice/critique of advanced capitalism are to be found in the work of Bennington *et al.* (2006) as well. There is a liberal/pluralist perspective which argues the potential for independent action at the local level.

While these claims are important we also need to situate them in competing models and theoretical frameworks and here Harvey (2000, 2005) provides detailed exposition of how particular places are shaped by the power and force of structural and economic influences. This perspective suggests that the capacity to act independently of the local state is therefore constrained and dependent upon the particular issues and circumstances of the time. We might expect to see the Forum (over time) become absorbed into the local institutional frameworks and systems.

Conclusion

The paper has argued that while the VCS in the UK represents opportunities for innovation and a different kind of local politics it is likely to become marginalised over time. The findings of our research and the experience in Oldham did confirm that local networks informed by a particular set of ethical (and religious) beliefs does have the capacity to provided spaces of influence at the local level. The networks and alliances which were formed and developed suggested that key individuals – who were perceived as local “leaders” or individuals of “influence” (priests and faith leaders) can exercise of relative autonomy. Their capacity to influence local situations is clearly constrained but on very specific questions of migrant workers and asylum seekers they did have a power to exercise moral authority.

The VCS in general does also provide an insight into the distribution of power and authority at a local level. We can conclude that a broad network of independent agencies acting in alliance or at a distance from the local political institutions can provide spaces for innovation and critical reflection. These spaces (also occupied by NGOs) are contested and difficult spaces to be located in. They are places in which other voices – local political institutions or welfare agencies – seek to be heard and to exercise power and influence.

In the case study chosen for this paper from the wider research project we might conclude that individuals and agencies are able to mobilise on a very limited set of issues before they become drawn into the institutional processes and systems and represent the co-option of the local state of voices of difference or dissent.

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