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Willing partners: the role of the voluntary and community sectors to the democratic process

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Final Report to ESRC

Background and objectives

Voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) are seen by policy-makers and by scholars as an important route through which individual citizens can contribute to democracy. Giddens (2000) argued that a stronger third sector was part of progress towards 'democratising democracy', while Putnam's concern with the role of voluntary associations in producing social capital as a route to effective governance is well-documented (Putnam 1993). Government's current emphasis on partnership and governance reflects a wider interest in the contribution that the voluntary and community sector (VCS) might make to democratic life.

At the same time, VCOs are gaining an increasingly high profile both as service providers in the welfare market and as partners in governance and policy-making. Concerns are emerging as to whether these service delivery roles are compatible with a continued advocacy role, over the uneven distribution of power and resources within the sector, and over the extent to which VCOs are themselves as representative and accountable as they may be expected to be given their current role.

However, while there is a body of research on interest groups and a growing research literature on the contribution of VCOs to partnerships, this research has not been placed within the context of a wider understanding of the role and contribution of the sector overall in the democratic process. This study aimed to develop conceptual frameworks which would enable a coherent analysis to be made of the range of different strategies adopted by voluntary and community organisations.

The study's objectives were to:

- Contribute to theory through the development of a taxonomy of modes of engagement by VCOs in policy;
- Gather empirical data on the strategies adopted by VCOs in different arenas, their reasons for choosing these strategies, how they addressed key issues such as legitimacy and effectiveness, and how different stakeholders were involved in policy processes;
- Contribute to knowledge by increasing understanding of the circumstances in which different approaches to legitimacy are appropriate, the ways in which organisations relate to and involve their constituencies and others in policy work, and how issues of representation and accountability are addressed;
- Generate hypotheses in relation to the policy role of VCOs and their contribution to the generation of social capital for civic engagement;

- Generate frameworks for understanding, analysing and assessing the effectiveness of policy strategies for all stakeholders.

Particular efforts were made to ensure that the views of the most excluded groups, particularly black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, were sought.

The first three objectives have been met through our application and testing of models based on insider and outsider strategies, political opportunity structures and types of legitimacy. The first and third are illustrated by the papers which accompany this report and, along with the second, discussed below. We are developing further outputs to help set the future research agenda and develop models of effectiveness.

Methods

The study comprised three phases: scoping; one national and four locality studies; and three case studies on policy issues. We focused on three broad policy arenas: the environment, older people and regeneration.

The first phase of the study established the project, completed literature reviews on the key policy areas and the policy process and carried out preliminary interviews with fifteen national organisations, including generalist umbrella voluntary organisations and national bodies in the three policy areas (including government).

In line with the team's desire to reflect the policy and practice concerns of potential research users, an Advisory Group was established, consisting of individuals from government, local government, voluntary and community sector (VCS). Three meetings were held with this Group at key stages of the study: after Phase 1, after Phase 2, and when fieldwork had been completed.

The purpose of Phase 1 interviews was to test the parameters for the study and ensure that needs of research users were recognised in designing the research instruments. Key issues emerging from Phase 1 included: whether voluntary sector activities actually support democracy (however defined); the relative importance of personal relationships of trust as opposed to formal links, campaigns and strategies; the impacts of funding arrangements; the links (or not) between policy influence and implementation; the lack of information about good practice in this area; the emphasis on responding to policy proposals rather than proactive engagement; the complex nature of the role of intermediaries; the nature of accountability, representativeness and legitimacy; and the difference between being involved and having an influence. These issues were reflected in the formulation of Phase 2 topic guides.

Phase 2 of the study was carried out in four localities, with a parallel study of national organisations. It was designed to identify and analyse in more depth the different ways in which VCOs contribute to the policy process; the different strategies adopted; how they and their policy 'targets' assess effectiveness; and how they address issues of legitimacy, representativeness and accountability. Within each locality, organisations were selected from across our conceptual 'map' (see below) and the three policy arenas. We also interviewed respondents from local and national government.

In designing this Phase, a key variable to be considered was the political opportunity structure. Localities were therefore chosen to provide a spread of different traditions of political control. Other criteria used in selection were: geographical spread; a mix of urban and rural areas; strength and diversity of the local VCS; and size and complexity of BME populations. The sample was indicative rather than representative, ensuring that the study could cover a range of circumstances in reaching its conclusions, rather than attempting to compare responses in the different localities. With input from the Programme Director, the initial plan to examine three localities was extended to four. The four localities included a rural shire county, a large multicultural industrialised metropolitan city, a southern unitary authority and a London borough with a substantial resident BME population.

Methodological issues arising in Phase 2 included finding ways of identifying and gaining access to 'outsider' groups (including groups operating 'below the radar' and outside traditional networks), and ethical issues of accountability to participants including confidentiality of material collected. The team decided to keep the areas chosen and the interviewees anonymous outside the locality, to encourage respondents to be open with their views and to protect sources when the data is archived. An internal coding system was used to protect anonymity.

Ninety-three Phase 2 interviews were completed in the Spring of 2001, almost all face-to-face (plus a few telephone interviews where face-to-face access proved difficult within our timeframe). These were roughly equally spread across the four localities and at national level. Interviews were carried out with senior staff or trustees of VCOs, local authority officers and councillors and civil servants. Most interviews were taped (with permission), with transcripts produced on a verbatim basis and stored on discs. Copies of transcripts or tapes were provided to interviewees on request.

Each team member led on one locality study and produced a summary of findings for their specific locality covering: the context and political opportunity structure; choice and effectiveness of strategies used by VCOs (according to themselves and those in government at local and national levels); issues of accountability, legitimacy and representation and mechanisms used by organisations to address these issues; policy networks and coalitions; the use of insider and outsider strategies; and some emerging conclusions on the contribution the sector made to democracy. These papers were reviewed by the research team at a mid-study meeting to clarify the issues for the next stage of data analysis.

The team then undertook a detailed analysis of all the interviews, using NVivo software, on the basis of the themes identified above. Each team member took responsibility for particular themes. Summaries of the resulting papers, following discussion with the Advisory Group, were worked up into detailed papers (some of them were then used as the basis for academic papers and presentations). They provided the basis for the *Interim Findings* produced in July 2001.

Further analysis of Phase 2 data revealed a number of tensions emerging from the experience of respondents: between effectiveness and accountability; between leadership and participation within organisations; between engagement in the policy process (with the potential for co-option) and retaining autonomy and independence; and between service delivery and advocacy roles. To study these in more depth, we narrowed our policy fields to pollution, minimum income for pensioners, and

neighbourhood renewal. These fields were chosen to reflect differences in: political opportunity structure (open/closed); policy focus (broad/narrow); levels of government involved (supranational, national, regional, local) ; stage in the policy cycle (agenda framing, policy development, policy implementation); the dominant VCO 'culture'; and consensus on agenda.

Respondents were again selected from across our conceptual 'map'. We also ensured coverage of organisations representing the voices of BME communities. For each policy area, representatives of 2-3 national organisations and a similar number of local or regional organisations were interviewed, plus: councillors, council officers, national level civil servants, advisers and politicians; and a small number of prominent regional and national media contacts relevant to the theme. 50 interviews were completed for Phase 3.

As in Phases 1 and 2, all interviews were recorded (with permission) and fully transcribed. However, in Phase 3, they were analysed manually, the view being that the use of NVivo would not enhance the analysis at this stage. Again, all organisations interviewed and all localities and individuals were anonymised. This raised interesting methodological issues, as the validity of the data depends to a large extent on the position of the individual interviewed within their own organisation, their personal experience and the status and position of their organisation in the field. The implications of this will be taken on board in writing up the findings of the study and it is likely that one paper will be produced reflecting on methodological issues.

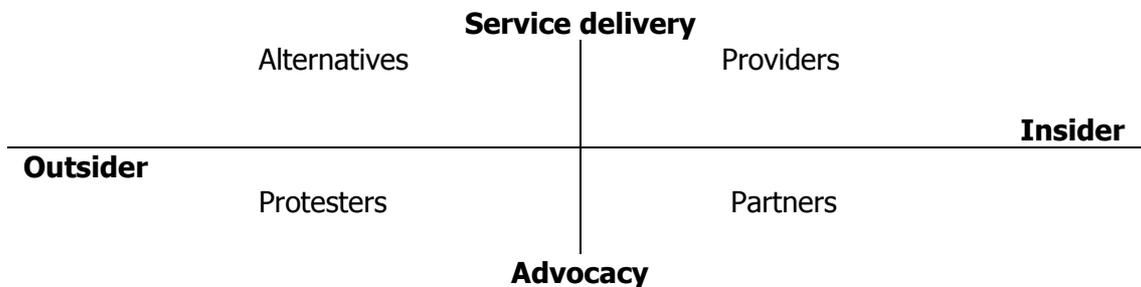
Results

If democracy is defined in terms of the electoral or party political system, most people agreed that the VCS does not affect it a great deal. However, many respondents were critical of the workings of representative democracy, feeling that it was too limiting a framework for encouraging local participation. Explanations for this turned on a combination of the globalisation of political and economic power, the centralising tendency of government, the inability or unwillingness of politicians to share power, and that local people were 'turned off' by representative politics. Respondents were also critical of government's attempts to widen the democratic process: consultative exercises often turned out to be shallow or favoured those most able to express their views, rarely making any substantial impact on final policy decisions.

The view of democracy led within the VCS was much wider than conventional representative democracy, based on notions of participatory democracy. The strongest contributions which VCOs could make to policy influence within this understanding of democracy were seen to be in: setting and shaping agendas; mobilising a diversity of views; and encouraging citizens to become more active in influencing and implementing policy (through capacity-building and developing social capital). Agendas could be shaped by providing feedback from people on the ground; by developing and giving voice to new ideas; and by acting as a monitor on policy change and on power-holders - to check the accountability of decision-makers and protect the rights of the least powerful.

During Phase 1 we developed a 'taxonomy' of the different strategies used by VCOs to influence policy and engage in the democratic process. This was based on two

axes – insider/outsider, based on work by Grant (1995) and others, and service delivery/advocacy. This was used as the basis for selecting study respondents. We also tested the validity of these dimensions in our interviews, assessing their relevance across different stages in the policy cycle, different political opportunity structures and with different policy issues.



It became clear to us at an early stage that this could not be done in a vacuum. The rapidly changing policy environment was redefining the rules of engagement and thus the nature of the choices that VCOs were making. If our research was to be relevant, we had to understand the way in which political opportunities were being restructured, and how this affected the strategic decisions VCOs were taking.

The political opportunity structure

To analyse the nature of the changing policy environment, we drew on work by Sidney Tarrow (1998) who identified five dimensions which characterise changing opportunity structures: increasing access; shifting alignments; divided elites; influential allies, and repression or facilitation.

The great majority of our national respondents agreed that *access* to official policy-making has increased enormously at most levels, especially at national and regional levels - they used terms such as 'sea-change' and 'watershed'. This trend was largely identified with the advent of the New Labour government in 1997, but respondents suggested that it was already beginning to be apparent under previous administrations in all three of our policy areas.

Access at local level varied. In regeneration, the central government lead had opened doors, strengthened the hand of change agents and forced even the most reluctant local authorities to the table, but there was still considerable variation in the capacity and willingness of authorities to work in new ways. This often depended on the local political make-up, but also on individual personalities and the imminence of local elections, which increased volatility. National government and regional offices were seen by some as an *influential ally* in VCS attempts to influence local policy, but many felt that the increasing centralisation of decision-making at national level reduced their ability to influence outcomes in the local arena, even in neighbourhood renewal where the influence of the local arena was strongest. Local influence was weakest in relation to minimum incomes for older people and variable in the environmental field where there were currently fewer opportunities for dialogue.

The existence of *shifting alignments* is illustrated by the description given by many of the policy environment as 'porous', 'swampy' and 'messy'. In neighbourhood renewal, respondents described a situation where the players on either side were no longer sure of their roles. The secondment of key VCS players into government at national and regional level increased the porousness of the boundaries but resulted in role confusion. In the environmental field, the growing importance of the concept of sustainable development has challenged traditional relationships.

Tarrow's concept of *divided elites* can be interpreted in a number of ways. At one level, increasing access meant that VCOs were discovering that government was not homogenous – differences between central and local government and between civil servants and Ministers were there to be exploited. Particularly significant was the feeling in many parts of government that policy was increasingly in the hands of the Treasury, which left other government departments feeling powerless but ironically more interested on using evidence from voluntary sector 'expert witnesses' to challenge the Treasury. A second way in which elites were divided, and which could be exploited by VCOs, was the division of key responsibilities between different government bodies (e.g. between the Environment Agency and local authorities; or between the government regional offices and the RDAs). However, respondents found that this made it difficult to identify a clear policy target. On the other hand (or perhaps because of the hegemony of the Treasury), there was no division in the elites on the dominant discourses – the primacy of economic growth; the new managerialism; the emphasis on delivery. VCOs could be involved in policy development (and of course implementation) in all three policy areas, but it was clear that the economically-driven agenda was not for debate.

It is arguable that the perceived new openness in government increased the possibility of finding *influential allies*, who welcome the evidence that VCOs can provide and the constituency of public support they can deliver. However the increasingly presidential style of government and its further centralisation of control was seen as acting against this possibility. In the environmental field, some VCOs looked to the private sector and argued that government sometimes lagged behind industry in coming to terms with greater environmental responsibility.

There were, however, some respondents who were suspicious of these new opportunities. The atmosphere was one of *facilitation*, but some forms of consultation could be experienced as a benign form of *repression*. The proliferation of consultations, partnerships, advisory groups etc. put pressure on staff resources and thus on setting and meeting the organisation's own targets. Unrealistic deadlines, unrealistic expectations without parallel resources, an underfunded infrastructure (especially in more marginalised identity communities such as BME or gay and lesbian communities) made it difficult to exploit the new opportunities effectively.

In summary, a new political space appears to be opening up, but the terms of engagement are unclear and the results are mixed. Some prefer the old way where they knew where they were. While most VCOs feel they have a voice and some that they have been able to influence the policy debate in their fields, many are unsure what is heard or feel that their influence is mainly at the implementation end of the policy process. Few could detect a strong and clear impact on longer-term strategic policy: they had much greater 'voice' but not necessarily more power.

Who is in and who is out

There are two dimensions to the insider/outsider dichotomy which we wanted to test. The first follows on from the discussion of political opportunity structures and addresses the question of who has access to the inside. Regime theory adopts a pluralist stance, arguing that the state depends on the co-operation of non-governmental actors and their resources. Maloney *et al.* (1994) argue that groups can have influence if they have something to trade. In our research, the currencies seemed to be good quality evidence (especially in the environment), the ability to come up with good policy ideas, and the ability to deliver on the ground (especially in neighbourhood renewal). In relation to neighbourhood renewal and policy on older people, the ability to deliver 'real people' (i.e. those that the government/local government/health authority etc. could not reach) was also extremely important. Contrary to expectations, the size of organisation was not always a predictor of influence – in neighbourhood renewal there was some suspicion of traditional voluntary organisations, which were being displaced by the community sector. In the older people's policy arena, perhaps mindful of the importance of delivering 'real people', legitimacy was demonstrated through providing access to smaller and user-based groups, although at local level, despite Better Government for Older People, older people were rarely given priority as policy actors in their own right.

Maloney *et al.* distinguish between 'peripheral' and real insiders, and we did find limits to how far government was prepared to listen to its critics. In the environmental field, however, it was clear that the use of challenging and oppositional strategies, up to and including illegal direct action, did not reduce government's (or multinational companies') willingness either to engage in dialogue with or to accept arguments from those organisations. Nonetheless, government sometimes appeared to listen simply in order to pre-empt its critics. In the renewal field, there was a suggestion that, now that the policy development phase was over, scope for influencing policy was more limited, while in policy relating to older people there were definite insiders and outsiders.

Who is in and who is not depends to some extent on capacity. Thus whilst in theory, BME organisations were very much 'in' (under the heading of 'real people'), the lack of infrastructure and resources to represent very diverse communities often excluded most of them in practice. There remain many important questions about the nature of representation and leadership within these communities.

The second dimension of the insider/outsider dichotomy we examined drew on the work of Grant (1995) and others. However, although Grant's typology goes beyond a simple insider-outsider distinction, we still found the reality to be far more complex. Lune and Oberstein (2001) offer a more sophisticated model differentiating between insider (embedded), outsider and mediating organisations. Our research supported this model in finding a range of organisations which routinely interact with both state and community organisations. We also found that organisations which would have been excluded from the policy process in the past (smaller community-based, user and BME organisations) and which may have welcomed their status as outsiders, are now being included. These groups now face the same dilemmas as the larger organisations they would previously have criticised. This suggests that there may be a cycle of development whereby many organisations which start as outsiders move into a different position, while others, particularly service providers, may never go through the outsider phase.

What was most striking was the fact that many organisations adopt both insider and outsider strategies according to circumstances, operating as insiders but moving to the outside as necessary; operating as insiders in one part of the organisation, outsiders elsewhere; or, especially in the environmental field, operating at both ends of the spectrum at once. Organisations which might be classified as 'mediating organisations' in Lune and Oberstein's classification (intermediary bodies but also some larger household name charities) provided training for user-based and community organisations who normally took more campaigning stances, and provided 'docking points' for smaller organisations so the latter could opt in and out of the formal process without losing their independence. Finally, alliances allowed organisations which generally work with government to adopt an 'arm's-length' campaigning stance.

Most organisations acknowledged the dilemmas that came with insider status but there were only a few committed outsider organisations in all three fields, sometimes by choice, sometimes by exclusion. Some of these clearly wanted – and tried to achieve – a more engaged relationship with government but felt that, partly because government did not like their critical stance and sometimes because of collusion by the insiders, they were excluded from what appeared as a somewhat 'cosy' insider consensus.

We also tested the distinction between service-providing and advocacy organisations. Again it was difficult to find 'pure' types of either organisation. Even smaller local organisations which did not see themselves as influencing policy turned out to be connected into local consultative processes and, especially when they were BME organisations, might find themselves wooed by policy-makers and intermediary bodies to provide a black perspective. Claims have long been made (Gutch 1992) that providing services on contract inhibits VCOs from speaking out. Our evidence was mixed: some claimed they were inhibited by the threat (or potential) that they might lose contracts; some actually provided evidence of funders discouraging critical activity; some claimed that they were not inhibited. Many government respondents respected the right of VCOs to criticise, but our limited evidence suggested that this varied considerably at local level. In the neighbourhood renewal field, following a lengthy period of consultation, the emphasis from government was now very much on the role of the VCS in the implementation process and there is a sense, nationally at least, that the broader policy development work has been done. New initiatives in the field, such as the introduction of local strategic partnerships, may provide further opportunities for local influence, particularly as consultation with local communities is a government requirement.

Effectiveness

National organisations were more likely than local ones to have thought about measures of effectiveness in pursuing policy change, but few organisations measured this effectiveness. When organisations do assess effectiveness, they look mainly at: being part of the process; recognition (e.g. media coverage); and actual changes to policy and practice. Generally, effectiveness in influencing policy seemed to depend on the extent to which an organisation's agenda fitted with the government agenda. Where organisations were seeking to influence the agenda, they reported a 'drip, drip effect' whereby policies that the sector had advanced for some time were now 'popping up' as government policy.

Organisations did point to clear gains in terms of influencing the debate and achieving piecemeal changes. However, there were few cases where they felt they had influenced longer-term strategic policy and there has been little systematic analysis of how voice translates into impact. Our findings that the policy process appeared to be less rigid than had been anticipated, with a more porous policy environment, suggests a need for a fairly complex methodology for assessing effectiveness and we are aware of measures being developed by the Audit Commission and the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit *inter alia*.

Legitimacy

Brown *et al.* (undated) suggest four sources of legitimacy that are important to VCOs concerned with influencing the policy process: moral; technical or performance; political (including accountability); and legal. All of these were evident in our research. VCOs typically emphasised moral and political legitimacy, e.g. democratic structures and formal accountability to members and users. Government and other policy targets, however, were more likely to emphasise technical or performance legitimacy, e.g. expertise, the quality of research or delivery on the ground. Some government respondents were indeed critical of a perceived preoccupation with process in the VCS, while some respondents spoke of the excessive influence of 'talismanic individuals' (social entrepreneurs, for example) with central government. We also found evidence of this also at local level. Political legitimacy (e.g. representativeness) tended to be raised as an issue most often when an organisation was saying things the policy target did not want to hear, especially at local level.

Nonetheless, democratic structures were seen as a 'moral' duty by VCOs. Some claimed that the contribution of the sector to democracy depended on this and were critical of organisations who were wanting on this front. Others argued that being backed up by a strong membership strengthened their hand in dealings with government. On the other hand, some also emphasised the importance of independent research in giving them legitimacy, especially in the environmental field. More generally, organisations spoke of the tension between effectiveness and accountability, and between leadership and participation. Several argued that it was important not to allow internal issues of accountability and participation to subvert effective engagement with policy-makers.

Activities

An early invitation to present to an NCVO research conference provided an opportunity to test the overall design of the project with other researchers in the sector. Since then, we have shared interim findings at several national and international conferences:

- NCVO, Researching the voluntary sector, London, September 2000
- Political Studies Association Annual Conference, Manchester, April 2001
- Social Policy Association Annual Conference, Belfast, July 2001
- NCVO, Researching the voluntary sector, London, September 2001
- Voluntary Sector Studies Network seminar, London, November 2001
- ARNOVA (Association for Research in Non-profit Organisations and Voluntary Action) conference, Miami, November 2001

- Policy Xchange, British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres, London, April 2002
- International Third Sector Research Conference, Cape Town, July 2002
- Social Policy Association Annual Conference, Middlesbrough, July 2002

In addition, one national seminar was organised for participants and other interested parties to the research in London, including participants from the London case study site, two others have been organised in individual sites, with the final one to follow in the autumn in the fourth site.

Presentations were also made (on methodology and the overall findings) to two events organised as part of the Democracy and Participation Programme.

Dissemination

We published an *Interim Findings* in the summer of 2001, which was widely disseminated to all respondents from Phases 1 and 2, to the Advisory Group, and through subsequent academic and policy presentations. It also formed part of a submission of evidence to the Commission on Local Governance managed by the Local Government Information Unit. A final Findings is in preparation.

Three papers based on conference presentations have been either published or submitted for journal publication and two further outputs are in preparation:

'Cooption or empowerment?', published in *Local Governance*, April 2002.

'Protest or partnership? the voluntary and community sector in the policy process', submitted to *Policy and Politics*.

'Legitimacy and the role of third sector organisations in the policy process', submitted to *Voluntas*.

'Measuring the effectiveness of the voluntary sector in influencing policy', to be submitted to *Evaluation*.

'The third sector in the democratic process', chapter to be submitted to an edited book on *Democracy and Protest*.

Further conference presentations are planned for:

- NCVO, Researching the voluntary sector, Nottingham, September 2002
- ARNOVA conference, Montreal 2002

A book proposal is currently being prepared for Routledge for publication in the Democracy and Participation programme series (in 2003). Other potential publications are under discussion.

Impacts

Policy makers, other VCS researchers and practitioners have been involved in discussing our findings throughout, have invited us to give presentations to their own constituencies and have shown considerable enthusiasm. We will continue to disseminate the work and encourage further research on the agenda that is emerging from our research.

Future research

A proposal is being prepared to carry out research on the relationship between leadership and participation, and to explore the links between representation, bridging and bonding social capital. Further work is also planned on accountability. Team members are also carrying the work forward through other research on the relationship between the VCS and government and on community participation in neighbourhood renewal and environmental policy. There is also scope for further work to test the hypothesis that the potential for advocacy work is constrained by contracts for service delivery, as this is often claimed but not proven.

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