TAKING VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY ACTION

An event to discuss what can be done to promote and safeguard independent action, October 5th 2006

This event was about how to tackle the barriers that prevent social action and stifle dissent. Important in this is the failure of voluntary organisations, community groups and individuals to challenge the status quo, the Government and regressive statutory sector policies. The initiative came from four people with experience in the voluntary and community sector (VCS), in association with the New Economics Foundation (nef). Invitations were sent out to people known to be taking independent action already and/or who were seriously interested in the issue.

On the day, nineteen of us met, discussed, complained, celebrated, imagined how things could be different and came up with some proposals for action.

We included seven people working in second tier organisations supporting local groups, two of which focused specifically on health; three working on housing and homelessness issues; one from a student group working on global poverty and human rights; another from a grass roots organisation working with African communities; an academic, and several independents and freelancers.

Several people working directly at grass roots level had hoped to come, but were prevented by the pressure of their immediate work. We were very aware that this left a serious gap and it was seen as crucial that we make effective links with grass roots voices in the near future.

1. Why we came

An initial introductory round revealed a wealth of experience and depth of feeling.

The political climate

People were angry about the political climate: not only in relation to the welfare state, but also more generally:

> *One person quoted a senior civil servant who had said at a private meeting :'the Government's agenda is to move as much of mainstream public services into the private and voluntary sector as we can'…*

> *"I think the voluntary sector is more than the Prime Minister's delivery van"*

> *"We think the NHS could easily die…"*

> *"the culture in which we are operating is increasingly set by the values of the Daily Mail"*

> *"homeless people and asylum seekers are demonised, ASBOs are chucked at sex workers and not at the people who use them"*

The VCS response

There was a strong feeling that organisations representing the VCS are passive in their response to government policy and fail to act effectively on behalf of the sector:

> *"I'm worried about the voluntary sector losing the plot around the …..'fit for purpose', 'change-up' kind of things"*

"it feels like the sector is sleepwalking….playing the game, swallowed up….people don't ask the question, what <u>should</u> the role be for a voluntary organisation?"

"I've dealt with a number of CVSs, the story is the same….they have a target to meet, they lie about meeting their targets and grass roots organisations are ignored"

Smaller organisations lose out

On a linked point, people argued that the VCS is dominated by large organisations, at the expense of smaller organisations which are closer to communities.

"The way the voluntary sector …is organised is increasingly dominated by the supermarket model – Tescoisation…..so many of the smaller organisations are struggling to survive while the big brigades are hoovering up the resources"

"lumping together voluntary organisations and assuming they can speak for communities is a big mistake"

These smaller organisations also lose out because funders and Government are asking the wrong questions and don't understand what we are trying to do.

"the caring side of this work is being told to take a rest because we've got outcomes to make"

"[there's a] ….real pressure on those independent small scale organisations who are trying to be holistic in their approach to people….real people with multiple issues.. [but we're].. having to tick the boxes"

"I work with people who want to….. use their gifts in their communities….. they go on doing things…..but are excluded by the way contracting happens, don't get a chance to get contracts"

"the needs of citizens are being completely ignored….we're just meeting political targets"

What's a 'partnership'?

People suggested that we need to reconnect with the essential qualities of voluntary and community action, and that this may mean questioning or rejecting the "partnerships" currently on offer:

…*".[there is a] stage of saying 'we are a bunch of people who care, so we're going to do something' rather than 'you've got to give us money' "*

"I see green shoots in other bits of voluntary and community action…for example explicitly campaigning organisations, people who are taking action, day in day out …I want to make connections with these forms of community action which aren't about public service provision, because I hope they can help the world I come from find its sanity and its roots again"

"Third sector organisations need to be clearer about what their values are and when that means you have to say NO to partnerships…."

2. Experiences and perspectives

We went on to discuss in small groups, looking in more depth at the *critical issues*, our own *experiences in tackling these* – particularly successes - and *what can be done* in the future.

This is what we noted down.

Critical issues

This is a summary of what people saw as the critical issues affecting them.

Regain a critical voice:

- challenge the negative effects of professionalism, managerialism and creeping privatisation. Turn our attention from servicing ourselves/funders to working alongside grassroots interests
- challenge the pressures towards consensus
- keep outside the establishment club
- regain our own language

Have our own agenda & values:

- be vocal about what we are here for and what we want
- challenge the corporate takeover
- bridge the emerging gap between voluntary groups and communities/citizens
- use our own language

Difficulties on the ground:

- inequalities and lack of cohesion amongst and amidst communities
- difficulties in participation
- small groups are under threat and below the radar
- detachment of voluntary organisations from community groups
- loss of a community development approach

Focus on rights:

- need to assert a rights approach
- the right to campaign
- human rights and equalities
- use the law to advance community interests

Funding regimes

- these direct us away from community needs
- a worrying move towards second tier agencies (CVS etc.) and other voluntary organisations becoming funders themselves (conflict of interest with their core purpose? E.g. Public Law Project is currently taking legal action against a CVS on behalf of local community groups)
- funders create a Catch 22 e.g. policy that requires a group to have reserves, to show sustainability, but then excludes them from funding because they have money!

Structures to mobilise:

We may need to reinvent structures, since existing ones have been co-opted or are too fragile to be effective. Structures are needed

- for local participation
- for groups and networks
- to deal with the resistance when we challenge current power relations
- to enable us to have room for conflict
- to provide connections with other networks/activities

Accountability:

- who is taking decisions at the moment, particularly around the critical issues?
- who speaks/acts for communities?
- questions around representation, mandates, participation
- what's the best model(s) for accountability?
- what do such models, as well as current models, tell us about desired democratic principles and "empowerment"?

Politics:

- local politics: can have a destructive effect
- what and where are the politics of the sector? Politics are being driven from outside the sector.
- power relations need to be transparent, whether within the sector or between the sector and other parties (e.g. government, local authorities, funders)

Our experiences - what have we already done?

Things we do as individuals

- persistence!
- self-belief in own knowledge and experience
- hold onto a vision
- key individuals being prepared to take on the challenge
- commit to taking action
- take a risk

In our own organisations

- effective boards and management – guarding the vision
- say no to work
- stick to own agenda and resist mission drift
- maintain transparency

Methods and tactics for impact

- harness publicity to shine a light on what is taking place
- guard accountability
- appreciate positive role of ombudsmen/ judicial review
- value of local campaign
- knit together local action to form campaigns (legal, co-ordination)
- mobilise campaigns in public forums
- use the power available (e.g. walking out of public meetings)
- locate the points of conflict to mobilise around
- avoid a simple 'good vs. bad' interpretation
- challenge assumptions
- convince independent trusts and foundations to value campaigning/ independence as a key value for the sector
- invest in 'dynamos' that exist within communities
- appreciate and build on small changes

Working together in solidarity

- learn/ relearn from other agencies (European and global)
- find the progressive people and building alliances
- find others willing to take risk

Some examples

- Government forced to back track on ALMOs by tenant action
- Using structures to challenge accountability within elected bodies (e.g. eight citizens challenging spending decisions in Leicester)
- Tenants on Housing Association boards are bound by law to put interest of Housing Association first (negative example)
- Public Law Project has many examples of community group successes
- Challenging the vision for delivery of Supporting People in relation to homeless people
- Experience of consultants able to challenge assumptions and bring wider vision
- Community Links resisted pressures to become a national organisation in order to sustain funding and be seen as 'successful'

What needs to be done

Our discussions highlighted five areas for action:

Develop understanding and analysis

- understand the political agenda and the forces at work e.g. privatisation
- develop an analysis, leading to a manifesto and a 'banner'
- work on language to expose hypocrisy and true intentions, and reclaim our own language
- identify what are the mechanisms for demonstrating genuine independence
- understand and use the idea of a spectrum of activity and position i.e. that groups and agencies cross a wide and diverse range and strategies and we need to be particular to the point of the spectrum that we are addressing

Clarify our standpoint

- be explicit about the politics of what's going on
- be clear why what we are saying is different and how
- be clear about what it is that holds us together
- be explicit/specific about values and use these to build the confidence of independent action
- turn values into principles to make them more hard-edged, tangible and finite
- make power relations visible
- put protest back on the agenda, including direct action

Tackle structures

- build new structures to support each other, especially:
  - groups on the frontline
  - that pay attention to representational issues
  - which link local communities to other levels e.g. pan-London
- tackle the co-option of second tier bodies
- put the second tier bodies under pressure
- promote pluralism
- head for the 'middle ground' of the VCS – those organisations between community groups and the mega-agencies – there is potential for support here

How we should approach what we do

- show people how they can act differently
- use stories and narrative to raise awareness
- avoid the impression that we are "trying to get back to a golden age"

- teach new generations that there is another way and the techniques needed
- where are the young people? (including at this day) – we have got to get to them
- recognise the internal tensions inside organisations – work to help achieve congruence between staff, trustees and users
- see what you can do in the space you occupy and also find ways of joining up the spaces to make a bigger whole

Practical things we can do

- speak out, organisationally and on a one-to-one basis when you get the chance
- build a membership base
- look for alliances between clients, frontline staff and trade unions
- develop cross-sector alliances and the practical connections between them

3. What we want to do now

The afternoon began with some discussion about what might come out of the event. The initiators were looking for others to join a reference group for the project, and also to steer future activity, which might include:

- more thinking work, aiming to come up with a manifesto
- developing a more formal structure to carry our interests forward
- coming up with practical things that will be useful to people working at grass roots level.

This provoked some disagreement. Some people argued that the initiators need to define aims before asking others to join in. If we are a group, what kind and who is our constituency? We need some kind of manifesto first. Others felt that this was not possible at this stage, or that the participants already formed a de facto network.

There was however some agreement that whatever we come up with, *"unsettling"* the status quo would be a key aim: *"dropping a stone into a pond"*.

4. What independent action would look like

In order to help provide direction for a manifesto, we explored what independent action would be like. What would happen if we and our organisations were doing it, and how would it affect the outside world? The facilitator summarised the discussion in visual form (reproduced later in this paper). Key ideas included:

How it would feel for individuals

- we would feel supported by our peers, we'd have a group to talk to about ambiguities and anxieties
- it would be hard work, but exciting and energy-giving.
- it would give a feeling of joy and freedom
- we would have time to reflect on what we are doing
- consultants would feel able to tell the truth

Relationships with funders

- it would be accepted that we may disagree with and challenge funders: conflict would be seen as a healthy starting point.
- instead of responding to other people's targets and agendas, we would take our steer from and be accountable to communities, beneficiaries, users.
- we wouldn't be afraid to tell funders the truth – we would be able to be honest about mistakes and share the learning that comes from them

Relationships within the sector

- we would trust representative bodies to speak on our behalf and mediate with those we are trying to influence
- they would reflect the enormous diversity and range within the sector
- within the sector as well as outside, it would be acceptable to challenge one another

How the sector needs to work

- we need to get back to asking the "why" questions as the voluntary sector used to do
- we need to revisit some earlier approaches for participation, involvement and flat structures. Are the people we work with having something 'done to' them, or are we involved alongside them?
- this means resisting the increasing professionalisation of voluntary and community action, which leads to an unequal role in our relationships with people, while still being professional in what we do.

5. Final discussion

At the end of the afternoon we pulled together ideas about how to go forward, and individuals indicated what part they were prepared to take in future work.

A number of people flagged up a concern that we must get involved with grass roots organisations as an urgent next step. It was suggested that one piece of work would be to gather and disseminate stories of successes and difficulties in taking independent action, which would be helpful to people at the grass roots. Several people felt that an email network – perhaps with the occasional meeting – would be a really useful outcome.

Most participants were keen at the least to be part of some kind of information-sharing email network. Some needed to see how the project takes shape before deciding about any greater commitment than this, but a number agreed to be part of a reference group. Of these, one person offered advice and support on public law issues, and another IT support: setting up a conversation space on the web. Several in the initiating group could continue to offer time and support to the initiative for a few more months. It is also hoped that we will be able to find some funding in the future so that we can operate on a bigger scale.

This event represented a first, but important, step along a long road. The discussion was rich and brought a lot of material to the surface. The organising group took much reassurance from the views expressed and the support shown and offered. Their next steps will be to identify practical work to address the issues raised during the day. We hope that this is the acorn from which a mighty oak will grow!

Andy Benson
Ruth Cohen
Colin Rochester
Penny Waterhouse
Lucie Stevens

The wider world

How would I / my organisation feel?

committed amateurs
accountable to our communities
benefiting the people we were set up to benefit

Time to reflect
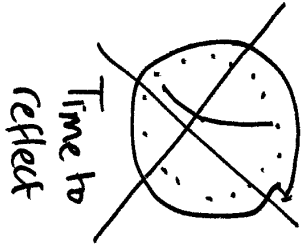
LATIN AMERICA

WEST AFRICA

challenge within the sector

☒☑ Honesty about mistakes — share learning

Acceptance of conflict. Starting point for the direction things can go in.

opportunity / danger

a group that's safe to talk to

supported, not isolated

representation that resonates

Government

what would it look like? current debate

Community

intermediaries
grassroots connections

Funders
— intelligent — connecting — listening

RIGHTS

Our expertise (we know what works)

Hard work — generates energy

consultants that tell the truth — benefit of experiencing independence & acting on it.

support & becoming a source giving & joy

other people's targets & agendas