

# National Coalition for Independent Action

## Promoting and Protecting Voluntary and Community Action

This paper describes a new initiative to demonstrate and celebrate the role of voluntary and community action to challenge and change the world around us. The initiative is *not* an enquiry or a research exercise. We start from the premise that the capacity of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to take independent action, to pursue divergent interests, and become actively involved in dissent is already in jeopardy. This threat to independent action will, if unchallenged, erode and undermine our civic society, our political health, and the capacity of communities to get what they need for themselves. The purpose of the initiative is to legitimise independent action and dissent and to provide solidarity and support to those already taking such action, or wishing to do so. We are looking for people and organisations who identify with our perspective and want to do something about it.

### Background

The freedom to associate with others in pursuit of common purposes has a long history in our society and is acknowledged as a universal human right (Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Article 20 The Right to Freedom of Assembly and Association). The UK's large and diverse Voluntary and Community Sector is one manifestation of the exercise of this right. Over many centuries groups and organisations have engaged with all aspects of our social, economic, political and community life, to organise around common interests and influence, protect and extend those interests. "Universal suffrage, universal education, social insurance, free health services, social housing are all the products of groups and individuals standing up for an ideal and then promoting it often in the face of official indifference, if not active resistance".<sup>1</sup> Since the end of the Second War there have been many changes in the prominence and profile of VCS activity, in part a response to the rise, and now the decline, of the welfare state. Today, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the VCS remains an extraordinary - and precious - demonstration of public involvement in public affairs.

Crucial to the role of the VCS is the freedom and capacity to take *independent action*. By independent action we mean the freedom and the means by which voluntary agencies, community and campaign groups decide for themselves, in conjunction with their users and communities, their interests, aspirations, objectives, priorities, methods and ways of working. It is on the basis of these decisions - as independent organisations - that engagement with the outside world then takes place. Such engagement will not always go

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<sup>1</sup> Living values: a report encouraging boldness in third sector organisations. Community Links 2006

smoothly or secure consensus or agreement. Where the pursuit of divergent interests or active dissent is required, the capacity of an agency or group to take independent action is truly tested.

We believe that this capacity (or indeed willingness) to take independent action has been and continues to be eroded, chiefly as a result of Government policy and action. The sector is seen as important and the Government has pursued many policy and programme initiatives aimed at creating the kind of sector that it wants to see - in particular, to encourage volunteering and active citizens, to deliver public services through statutory or quasi-statutory requirements, funding regimes and private sector performance management techniques and to promote dialogue with Government through "partnerships". At the same time, Government assumptions that the VCS is accountable to communities and provides a representational voice for local people, are highly questionable.

The current direction of travel is creating an emerging crisis for the VCS, which must now be tackled. However, there are many difficulties in grappling with this issue, not least:

- ***The diversity and pluralism associated with the term 'voluntary and community sector'***. This description encompasses multi-million pound professionalised organisations, through to small, informal volunteer-based community groups, all established through a wide variety of motives and interests. Increasing professionalism has built a Trojan Horse - creating distance from communities and dependency of clients, with larger service-orientated organisations drawing resources away from smaller community-based and campaigning activities. The circumstances of the whole of this range of activity need to be addressed;
- ***An increasingly supine response from the VCS itself***. At both organisational and personal levels, many within the VCS have responded to outside influences with 'learnt helplessness' - a response also affecting those they work with ("*how could I say no, and how do I do it .... what difference will it make anyway...?*"). A result has been large tracts of the non-statutory public service sector diverted from their core purposes, and feeling intimidated in expressing opposition, whilst the more informal community-led sector remains unrecognised and under-resourced;
- ***The 'non-legitimation' of protest, dissent and opposition***. Agencies and individuals with the will and expertise to take action are isolated and under-resourced. Campaigning activities become curtailed by legislation associated with terrorism and anti-social behaviour, and through uncertainty about what is legitimate action and what is not. Whilst second tier bodies, in their partnership with Government, concentrate on organisational and service development at the expense of campaigning and representational roles.

## **Our opening assumptions**

We start from a critique of the VCS and from a position that seeks to re-establish the legitimacy of independent action. Our opening assumptions are that:

- A healthy, substantial, diverse and vigorously independent VCS is vital to our civic and social development, democratic renewal, the protection of our individual and collective liberties, and as a check on the power of the State. The different perspective that the sector can bring, and the pressure it can exert, is of great value and should be protected and celebrated;
- The diversity of the VCS is vital for our 'social ecology' if we are to avoid becoming 'clone Britain' - a tendency that is besieging other areas of our community life;
- There are lessons to share with and learn from developing countries, intent on building civic society, democratic processes and public sector services and structures, and where the non-governmental sector already plays a critical role;
- The VCS can only carry out its role successfully if it is free to work and develop by reference to its users, its participants, the communities from which it springs; and if there is recognition of the inevitability of conflicting agendas and priorities, with the capacity and skills to act independently in such circumstances;
- In pursuing its interests, the VCS needs to draw on a mixed set of tools - collaboration, co-operation, accommodation, influence, challenge and outright dissent;
- The legitimacy of dissent and challenge, essential to the structural relationship between the VCS and Government, has been replaced by the language and practice of "partnership working", which disregards the realities of unequal power relationships and divergent interests, and assumes an alignment between State and VCS interests;
- The capacity of the UK VCS to play its proper role is becoming seriously undermined: firstly as a result of Government inroads into the sector; and secondly as a result of the inability or unwillingness of the VCS to assert its own independence;
- It is time to name 'the elephant in the room' and to re-establish the legitimacy within the VCS at all levels to challenge Government, and other powerful interests, and to express and pursue divergent interests.

## **An antidote to Partnership**

We think that the need for action on these issues is demonstrable and pressing. We have ideas about how the issues might be tackled, for example to:

- seek out VCS agencies and groups committed to independent action, and work to understand their experience of the approach, the forces that assist and inhibit, and the infrastructure required to promote, protect and legitimise such action;
- build alliances between parts of the VCS that are committed to defend these ways of working and identify the means to demonstrate support and solidarity;
- highlight and champion, inside and outside the VCS, the value of independent action in the debate about the future of the VCS;
- carry out, and support, practical action that safeguards independent action
- recognise and integrate the broader (including global) dimensions of the issues involved - for example to include the debate about the role of the VCS in developing countries.

At the heart of this, is the need to build a larger group of people and organisations to begin the discussion and shape the action that is needed. We therefore want to make contact with:

- *Local activists (and those interested to become activists)* - groups, organisations and individuals we know to have challenged outside bodies, interests, policies, etc. as well as those who *want* to strengthen their position and capacity to take legitimate independent action but currently are constrained from doing so;
- *Second tier organisations or activities with commitment to, and involvement in, supporting independent action;*
- *Other individuals with experience of/interest in independent action* and who want to be involved in helping to shape the approach and actively contribute in other ways.

If you or your organisation would like to know more about this initiative and / or be involved in it, please have a look at our (fledgling) website: [www.independentaction.net](http://www.independentaction.net) and get in touch with us at [indyaction@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:indyaction@yahoo.co.uk)

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