Action for Social Justice

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EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST SOUGHT

Social Justice & the case for supporting local action

A major role for voluntary and community action lies in the struggle for social change and justice. The distinctive strength of such action is that it relies on people with passion exercising the liberty to come together around a shared concern, and acting on that concern in whatever way they think necessary or appropriate. The positioning of such groups in that part of civil society we call 'ungoverned space' is crucial, as it provides an independent vantage point, distinct both from the interests of the state and of the private, market-driven sector, both of which are often the target for social change.

To be clear, what we are talking about here is people working to challenge and change public policies/practices, spending decisions or commercial practices that unfairly disadvantage people, perpetuate inequality and discrimination, or fragment and undermine communities. Examples would be groups campaigning for affordable housing or against punitive homelessness policies, for improvements in home care or educational provision, or for a better deal for particular groups such as carers, older people, refugees and asylum seekers, children and families. This action is essentially political.

Action for social change and justice, of course, can and does take place at all levels. However, NCIA believes that the greatest difference can be made at the local level – especially during this current period of recession, with falls in living standards, public spending cuts and continued fragmentation of public services through privatisation. Much of this impact will bite locally and this is where action to mobilise and safeguard community interests is required.

Despite 'official' support for this kind of citizen-based action, the reality of change in the voluntary and community sector over the last two decades has been very different. An important casualty of the move from grants to contracts to commissioning of voluntary agencies, especially to run erstwhile public services (home care for example), is the loss of the potential and inclination for these agencies to undertake advocacy and campaign work for social justice. Despite government rhetoric about civil renewal and 'empowerment', in practice the interest has been in the 'professionalised', and service-providing part of the voluntary sector. This is where the money has gone and the attention focused on the role of the voluntary sector in delivering privatised public services according to 'managerial' private sector practices.

At the same time, voluntary and community groups have been progressively moved into closer and more subservient relationships with local state agencies through the confidence trick of 'partnership working', in reality a fig leaf for grossly unequal power relationships. Authentic community agendas and action – particularly those that require action against the local state – have been eroded and further marginalised. Where resources have been available to the community sector these have rarely been given directly to the groups, to support their work. Rather, a multiplicity of second tier agencies has been financed to work with the community sector to 'increase its capacity' and make it 'fit for purpose'. This has generally been seen to mean encouraging groups to become more formally organised, improve their 'governance', and tie their activities more closely into the priorities of statutory agencies.

Campaigning on social issues has lost out to service provision. 'Professional' voluntary agencies and community groups have become de-coupled, thus weakening the fabric formed of diverse local links and mutual solidarity. Community action has remained marginalised, under-resourced and isolated. And the pull to professionalism has acted to silence the anger and drive of collective social action. There are now even to be National Occupational Standards for campaigning!

We want to find effective ways of reversing this slide towards voluntary action being subsumed under contract or co-option to Government and state interests. We want to promote and celebrate vigorous action for social change, and underscore the importance of its structural independence. We want to show what is possible when people are determined and supported to pursue their own agendas rather than those prescribed by the local or national state. We want to re-connect voluntary and community action, to bring solidarity and strength across the range of local voluntary effort. We want to challenge the current deficit model of "capacity building" and help groups break out of the stifling managerial controls which now so dominate approaches to local action and involvement.

What's needed to make it happen? Redesigning local second tier support
One important key to reinvigorating action for social justice is the availability, accessibility and appropriateness of support and development resources at local level. That this kind of support is needed is indisputable (e.g. forming and supporting activist networks, identifying perspectives, managing statutory relationships, understanding how things work, tactical approaches to achieving change, etc.). But making this point highlights the inadequacies of the current situation in virtually all areas. For example, one would expect that a local CVS would provide a focus and haven for groups struggling for social change. In practice, it is difficult to find a CVS which encourages and supports such activity in a meaningful way. The bulk of CVS work is technocratic and apolitical, focuses on organisational development, assumes that community activists need to be trained and reorganised according to the norms of 'best practice', and

encouraged to spend their time responding to issues and agendas set by local statutory agencies. Many second tier organisations have also undermined their credibility as support agencies by allowing themselves to become competitors in public service delivery, rather than challenging the ways in which statutory sector policies have vandalised and emasculated voluntary action.

The character and content of most of the 'capacity building' available is thus focused on process and not on content. The army of 'capacity builders' and 'partnership workers' employed by second tier agencies often know next to nothing about local homelessness policies, the state of home care, or asylum seekers' struggle to survive, and it is not part of their job to know about these things. And where content is addressed it, most often, done bureaucratically and according to terms of reference set by the statutory sector (instead of helping groups to campaign about the poor state of home care, for example, they are encouraged to spend their time responding to 'the transformation agenda for adult care').

What we need is a new approach: local second tier support activity which:

♣ avows explicit commitment to the pursuit of social change and justice – in other words second tier work is itself seen as an act of solidarity with frontline groups
♣ gains authenticity with local activists, and
♣ works in ways that are content-driven and directly support local people – through community and voluntary action – to press for the changes that they seek.

The generic 'infrastructure' organisations, like CVSs, will be one place to look for this reframing of assumptions and purposes behind support for social action. There will be new opportunities to try and engage these agencies, for the gravy train of government support (Capacity Builders etc.) is now coming to an end. The fallout from this period of cuts will provide an imperative for CVSs and others to review what they have been doing, and it is hoped that some will find their way back to a more radical role.

However, we need also to look elsewhere, especially to sources of second tier support that don't call themselves 'second tier'. One example (already quite common) is support from frontline voluntary organisations which, in addition to their own services or activities, spend time and effort in helping other groups to develop and prosper. This source of support is often largely invisible but can be highly effective, precisely because all involved are concerned with – and know about – the content of the work. Another example is connecting with and supporting peer support through community activist networks, a number of which we are already in contact with.

What we've done so far

In order to develop our thinking on these issues, we have been seeking out people interested in reframing these questions of effective support for local activists. So far our contacts and discussions include:

- ♣ a local CVS wishing to work with local groups in these ways
- ♣ a network of second tier advisers, working with local voluntary and community groups
- ♣ an organisation working in London, and beyond, on older people's issues
- ♣ regional and borough-wide community activist networks
- ♣ a City-wide network of youth workers
- ♣ a new emerging national network working on older people's issues
- ♣ a borough-wide political umbrella for activists, initiatives, voluntary and community groups
- ♣ a specialist unit working with Gypsies and Travellers
- ♣ a borough-wide forum for advice agencies.

In particular, we have just opened discussions with LVSC and the London Second Tiers Advisers Network, to investigate and prompt debate and action on the (in)effectiveness of current second tier support in the capital, which will assess the extent to which such work directly addresses and is involved with struggles for social justice and change.

Developing a head of steam – finding the new models – trying them out
As a result of our discussions, we are now ready to move ahead on the issues involved. As will be clear from the above, crucial to our perspective here is the need for this kind of second tier support to be locally based and locally connected. As a national organisation, we cannot do this work directly. Our recent experiences (directly supporting local action in advice services in Leicester, Hackney and Gloucestershire for example) have demonstrated the difficulties of such an approach. As is consistent with the Coalition's approach to our work in general, we see our role as to work with and through other people and groups.

We, therefore, wish to take two, related, steps. The first is to continue with our scoping of the issues involved and draw together an interest group of individuals and groups with a commitment to redefining second tier roles and ways of working. This working group will:

- ♣ be a source of intelligence and opinion about what is happening in this area of voluntary action across the country
- ♣ help form and maintain the new contacts and connections needed between forms of second tier support that currently exist in isolation
- ♣ continue to develop and promote the critique represented by this paper.

In the second strand of the work, we will be testing these ideas and approaches, and assess their influence and impact. We anticipate finding four second tier 'homes' from which to work in four local areas – two in London and two elsewhere – to demonstrate the action that can be taken and the support required to help groups achieve their goals of social change or justice.

Action on Social Justice: local demonstration work

The work in the four local areas will be run by each local second tier participant, with support from NCIA. The work might involve setting up new activities with local groups or supporting existing initiatives for social change. We want a range of actions on different issues, so we can learn as wide a range of lessons as possible. The idea is to see what happens – what works, what doesn't – and then make these experiences known to others who might want to work in this way. We will hope to find examples of action by community groups and activists and by service-providing voluntary organisations, as different considerations apply to these different circumstances.

The people we want to see working with each second tier home will already be clear(ish) about what they want to do locally, or at very least, what they are unhappy with and want to change. They will have the stamina to keep going when things are tough and will have their own local connections and relationships from which to build their campaign. The work will be theirs, as will the responsibilities and tasks that arise from the work. The second tier agency will be there to support them in this.

The themes behind the work will be various but could include, for example:

♣ action on issues to improve services for older people
♣ action to improve the state or availability of affordable housing in the area
♣ action to make a local area safer
♣ action to resist privatisation of or cuts to public services, or to improve already privatised services such as home care
♣ action to safeguard local grants for community action
♣ challenging commissioning processes where these result in the erosion of independence or a deterioration in the quality of services.

The particular support activities provided by each second tier home will need to be agreed at that level, and will depend on their aspirations, but might include:

♣ accessing evidence – helping activists to assemble their existing knowledge/experience and to collect other evidence which supports their campaign

♣ taking action with others – to help people to find allies, come together, agree joint plans and take action which will further campaign aims

♣ understanding the landscape – to pull together intelligence and understandings about the current status quo, how things work, what needs to change, who needs to be persuaded and how, tactical knowledge of policy and practical change, influencing organisations

♣ supporting individuals or groups – to provide solidarity to individuals, as well as groups, in the often lonely and gruelling task of fighting for social change

♣ experience from elsewhere – having access to and applying the experiences of others in similar situations, whether from other projects involved in the work or elsewhere

♣ gauging results – to see what progress is being made, how this might be improved, tackling barriers and sharing lessons with other local groups.

NCIA contributions & co-ordination

Both strands of the project – building a network of radical second tier support and local demonstration work – will run concurrently so that they may each contribute to the whole and help to build a knowledge base from which to extend the approach. We expect the work to continue over a two year period. We know from similar work we have done, that progress can be slow, unpredictable and unexpected. Since this is development work it needs to be structured in a way that is flexible and adaptable to changing issues and circumstances.

The Coalition centrally will service and support the project overall and in particular:

♣ provide hands-on development support over the period of the project work

♣ co-ordinate the pilots, sharing learning and knowledge between pilots and from elsewhere

♣ provide a budget to support activities in the four pilot areas

♣ develop and extend the reach of the working group

♣ disseminate the experiences and emerging models of action which arise from the work, to others beyond the pilot areas

♣ continue to press for changes and improvements in second tier working in the sector as a whole

♣ record and make available the narrative of the project

♣ report to the funder(s).

We now need to find the resources to support this work.

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