# WHAT IS INDEPENDENT VOLUNTARY ACTION FOR?

**Preface**

One cheap response to the NCIA's critique of the ways in which independent voluntary action has been undermined by its co-option and colonization by the state and "sold out by the enemies within" has been to accuse us of being negative and of having no clear or developed view about what we want rather than what we are against. This short paper is written as a first step towards a more positive account of our aims and aspirations.

**A Short Answer**

Independent voluntary action exists to do the things that government can't, won't or shouldn't do to meet social need. It is not difficult to identify activities which most of us would agree should be the responsibility of the state on the one hand and those which are appropriate areas for voluntary action.

- comprehensive and equitable provision of health services, education and social security, for example, require public provision. The recent controversy over the decision of NACRO to become involved in running the penal system suggests there is some degree of consensus about much of this although there may be differences of opinion about exactly where the boundaries should lie; and

- advice services, advocacy and campaigning  activities need to be independent of the state simply because much of their activity relates to the actions of statutory bodies.

We can also identify a third category of activities which might be undertaken by the state or by the voluntary sector according to circumstances.  The key determinant of who does what is, we suggest, where the power or authority for taking action is located.  If the services or activities are shaped by the communities they serve and respond to the needs they have expressed, then voluntary organizations are the appropriate form of delivery agency. If not, the chances are that the state should provide.

**Some Further Thoughts**

Our discussion about the legitimate boundaries for independent voluntary action can be set in a slightly broader framework. It is fairly commonplace to look at three ways of meeting social need that are beyond the scope of responses from the personal or informal world of family and friends: the market; the state; and voluntary action.

*The Market*: here the means of meeting social need are purchased from businesses who exist to make profits from their activities. Reliance on this mechanism involves two problems which tend to be called "market failure". In the first place, the cost of provision are too high and/or the ability of those in need to pay is too limited to enable businesses to make a profit and they will move away from those products and/or those customers. In the second, the market is distorted by an asymmetry of information: consumers, it is argued, lack the information and understanding needed to make an informed judgment about what they need and to choose the product that will best meet it. This gap is met by the existence of voluntary and nonprofit organisations whose services consumers are happy to accept on trust based on the knowledge that the agencies are not going to take advantage of them in order to maximise profits.

*The State*: need is met by the provision of public services open to all and regardless of the ability to pay because the costs are met from the proceeds of general taxation.  Here again, there are two key limitations on the ability of the state to meet social needs – "government failure".  The first of these is a tendency to deliver uniform or "one size fits all" services which may not meet the full variety of needs and offer the full range of ways of meeting them.  The second is the limitation of the scale of services and their range to what is acceptable to the "median voter". In other words Government agencies can only deliver the kinds of provision that will enable them to gain re-election. Two examples of this constraint and how government can deal with it are President Johnson's Great Society welfare programme in the USA and the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the UK.  US voters were firmly opposed to an increase in the size of the Federal government but could tolerate increase welfare provision if it were made through nonprofit organisations (even though they were funded by the Federal government). Similarly, the British Government judged that public opinion was not ready to accept public programmes to help the victims of HIV/AIDS who were thought to have brought their problems on themselves thought the adoption of an immoral lifestyle. Instead, organisations of and for those affected by the disease were funded by the state to deliver services which it could not provide itself.

*Voluntary Action*: here need is met by the actions of those who are neither driven by the wish to make a profit nor required to carry them out by decisions made by government agencies.  Historically, these have been driven by philanthropy or mutual aid; funded by donations or subscriptions; and delivered by voluntary agencies. The limitations of this form of action have been acknowledged by the common historical process in which small scale and pioneering ways of meeting need developed by the voluntary sector have been taken on board and "rolled out" or "mainstreamed" by statutory agencies.  The limitations of voluntary action are that it tends to have insufficient resources to meet needs across the board and that it focuses on particular communities or subgroups rather than the population as a whole; these may, however, also be seen as its strengths. It has

also been criticised as paternalistic (in its philanthropic manifestations) and amateurish.

In the UK in the1970s it became increasingly accepted over much of the political spectrum that social need was best met by a system or mix called *welfare pluralism* in which all three mechanisms had their place: there could be - and should – discussion and argument about the different contributions made by each to the welfare mix but few doubted that all three needed to be part of it.

Clearly, what has happened since is a major shift away from this in both theory and practice.  What looks like a larger role for voluntary action through the mechanism of "partnership" is in fact take-over by government of the voluntary sector who exert detailed control over the objectives and the means of addressing social need.


**Another Perspective**

In an attempt to understand why voluntary organisations were different from statutory agencies or for-profit corporations, David Billis has highlighted their ambiguous or hybrid characteristics; with their feet in two different "worlds" – the associational world with its apparatus of membership and elected officers on the one hand and the world of bureaucracy with its hierarchical structures and clearly specified areas of work and scope of authority at each level. In the associational world, power flows upward from the members while in the bureaucracy it comes form the top.

These ambiguous structures, he has argued (in a paper written with Howard Glennerster), mean that voluntary agencies have a comparative advantage over other types of organisation -  from the market and state sectors – in addressing certain of the kinds of social disadvantage that have been collected together under the umbrella notion of "social exclusion". These are:

- societal disadvantage – individuals and groups who are blamed and stigmatised: and

- community disadvantage -   people who suffer primarily because they live in a particular community.

They do not have such an advantage when it comes to:

- financial disadvantage – individuals who lack the purchasing power to access the market; and

- personal disadvantage – people who cannot articulate a coherent preference.

**Issues of Accountability**

Another useful perspective is provided by an attempt to distinguish between different kinds of accountability. None of us would question the right of government and other funders to insist on *fiscal accountability* – to show that the money has been spent on the purpose for which it was given – and many would accept the need for *process accountability* – to demonstrate that the use of the money conformed to certain standards of behaviour such as the application of equal opportunities principles to the employment of staff funded by it. But, once funders start requiring *programme accountability* – which involves setting standards or boundaries for the way services are delivered – we begin to get uneasy and when we reach *accountability for priorities* and funders are seeking to decide exactly which kinds of people get access to provision, we may have reached the point at which accountability has become direct control.


**So What?**

We might be able to use these ideas – and others – to put more flesh on the bones of the initial short answer given above. This would involve being clear about the overall context in which independent voluntary action can exist and thrive; the kinds of social need and types of provision which need to be addressed in this way and those where voluntary action is likely to be more appropriate or more effective than the state or the market; and the kinds of relationship with the state (and others) as funder of our activities.

**CR**
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