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NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services

Working Paper 2

"ORDINARY GLORY" (BIG SURPRISE not BIG SOCIETY)

The changing shape of voluntary services: how this affects volunteer based community groups

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April 2014

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Foreword

This paper has been produced as part of the NCIA Inquiry into the Future of Voluntary Services. The Inquiry is specifically concerned with those voluntary organisations that deliver *services* in local communities, especially those that accept state money for these activities. These are the groups that have been particularly affected by successive New Labour and Coalition Government policies regarding the relationship between the voluntary and statutory sectors, and attitudes and intentions towards the future of public services. In this and other papers we refer to these as Voluntary Services Groups or VSGs.

It has long been NCIA's contention that the co-optive nature of these relationships has been damaging to the principles and practise of independent voluntary action. The nature and scale of the Coalition Government's political project – ideologically driven - to degrade rights, entitlements and social protections, and to privatise public services that cannot be abolished is now laid bare. This has created new imperatives for VSGs to remind themselves of their commitment to social justice and to position themselves so that they can once again be seen as champions of positive social, economic and environmental development.

Our Inquiry is a wide ranging attempt to document the failure of VSGs, and the so-called 'leadership' organisations that purport to represent them, to resist these shackles on their freedom of thought and action. But it is also an attempt to seek out the green shoots of a renaissance that will allow voluntary agencies to assert their independence and reconnect with the struggle for equality, social justice, enfranchisement and sustainability.

This paper is one of a number that has been produced through the Inquiry and is concerned with the activities and role played by small volunteer-based community groups, referred to in this paper as Community Services Groups (CSGs), in order to distinguish them from their professionalised and predominantly paid cousins, Voluntary Services Groups (VSGs). It has been prepared for NCIA by Mike Aiken to whom we offer grateful thanks.

For more information on the NCIA Inquiry please visit our website – www.independentaction.net.

NCIA
April 2014

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with two crucial components of independent social action – the role of Community Service Groups (CSGs) and the exercise of local Voluntary Action Activities (VAA). It examines their characteristics and considers some of the opportunities and threats facing them. It then considers if, and how, they can be sustained amidst the current drive to contracting and marketisation.

Voluntary organisations have a high profile in UK national life but it is often the very large charities which occupy this space: their leaders are interviewed on television, their appeals adorn billboards, celebrities pose at their events. The biggest 1,900 charities, with incomes over £5m per year, took nearly 69% of all income that came into the charitable sector in 2013. Nevertheless, they represent only 1.2% of all charities (Charity Commission, 2013). In fact many large and medium-sized charities are increasingly operating in quasi-markets: they are delivering, under contract to the state, welfare services formerly provided by the public sector. We should not be surprised, therefore, to see the incomes of the upper and middle end of the charity sector continuing to grow in the coming years as they move yet further into contracting relationships within an increasingly marketised social economy. Outsourcing already accounts for '15% of all public spending and 5% of UK GDP' (Preston, 2013). Indeed, if the trend continues large contracting charities may morph into gigantic (non-government) corporations similar to those that run parts of public sector provision in the USA.

Community Service Groups (CSGs)

At some distance from these big operators are the larger mass of smaller charities, community groups and informal associations engaged in social, welfare, leisure, recreational and associational life across the country. In contrast to the large players, 75% of all charities are small, yet gain only 3.5% of total charitable income (Charity Commission, 2013). There are over 52,000 small voluntary organisations (incomes below £100,000) and nearly 84,000 groups (with incomes below £10,000) and many in this latter group will be unincorporated or informal associations (NCVO, 2013). The scale of these micro level activities is illustrated by Soteri-Proctor's exploration of informal associations in two English cities. The research, which deliberately sought to exclude formal registered organisations, uncovered '58 self-organised activities operating in and around 11 streets of England' (Soteri-Proctor and Alcock, 2012:386). The overall number was considered to be an underestimate and included arts and music, multi-cultural and faith activities, specialist interests, self-help and mutual support, single identity cultural faith and ethnic activities and social club-based activities.

In this paper, the organisations we are focussing on are Community Service Groups. These include many of the 'small voluntary organisations and groups' and 'informal associations' identified above. Classifying their activities in any straightforward way is not easy, but the figures suggest that the largest number of small voluntary organisations is engaged in some aspect of social, welfare or community service in their area. Examples include groups running a small community centre or village hall, an advice line or interpreting service; a food co-op; a women's support group; a minority ethnic community history group; a young persons' sport group. Some may also play a part in hosting, fostering, or stimulating other kinds of activism - including 'informal community action by associations' (Waterhouse, 2013:13). For brevity, we call these groups Community Services Groups (CSGs) and discuss them in more detail in section 3.

Voluntary Action Activities (VAA)

This paper encompasses not just organisations but also Voluntary Action Activities (VAA). Such activities form an important part of this paper and are close to, but distinguished from, organisations. These activities may be generated or supported by CSGs although they may not depend on any single organisation to be realised. They can be seen as part of a political culture (Almond and Verba, 1989) that has generated a propensity for voluntary action (Lohman, 1992), 'civicness' and civility (Evers, 2009). This includes, for example, voluntary action activities undertaken by CSGs, collective action and mutual aid between people facing disadvantage, convivial social or cultural activities between neighbours, citizen actions to improve or sustain local community life, associational life and a discursive, critical public sphere.

This paper traces, in section 2, the changing context in which CSGs and VAAs are operating particularly in relation to contracting and marketisation. Section 3 looks at the features of CSGs and VAAs and highlights the type of services they offer. The emerging challenges and opportunities are then considered, in section 4, in relation to their future trajectories. The final section sets out points for action and discussion in relation to the future trajectory of CSGs and VAA and their roles in supporting associational life and taking independent action.

2. The Changing Context for CSGs and VAAs

In order to understand the current situation in the voluntary sector it is important briefly to take a step back to examine the historical trends. Voluntary organisations have become increasingly subject to competitive bidding for financial resources over the last twenty-five years. This 'contracting culture' represents an important mechanism within the marketisation of social goods. This constitutes the long tentacle of an 'anglophone' tendency and a 'model…that has been internationalized ' (Clarke, 2004:117). It seeks to introduce markets which entail 'the imitation of private business methods in public services – the so called New Public Management' (Crouch, 2011:16) associated with the neo-liberal project.

'Additionality'

Beveridge, the architect of the welfare state in the UK, gave importance to the role of vigorous 'voluntary action' as a means to add to public provision and responsibility (Beveridge, 1948) – an idea that covered both philanthropic and mutual activities. This idea had involved voluntary organisations – large and small - in exploring innovative areas beyond the boundaries of statutory provision. This contained the assumption, in principle if not always in practice, that agencies in the public and voluntary sector would share a concern with addressing a social ill by playing complementary roles in developing new services, or providing access routes into mainstream provision. The activities of voluntary organisations were to provide an *additional dimension* to tackling disadvantage. For example, a project to support drug users or street homeless people run by a voluntary organisation might gain greater trust in contacting clients than a state managed organisation. It could thus gradually signpost users to mainstream health and social services. In the ideal case this was a win-win-win for small voluntary organisations, state services and – most importantly – the clients.

Grants

There has always been some element of 'competition' for grant funding. Voluntary organisations

used to bid for three or five year funding for innovative projects at scale, such as through the national Urban Fund in the 1970s (Robson, B., *et al*., 1994). Women's organisations combating domestic violence, for example, extended their work by these means by employing a few staff. Meanwhile, community centres and black and minority ethnic groups gained grants from their local authority for a few thousand pounds, on an annual basis or in-kind support. By the 1990s experiments were undertaken whereby coalitions of local groups assessed grant applications and made recommendations to council officers (eg in Tower Hamlets) while a decade later Councils for Voluntary service (CVS) were sometimes directly administering funds in an outsourcing of the grants process.

Contracting

Contracting processes became conspicuous, to take one example, in area-based regeneration programmes. While older examples of commissioning services existed, the Conservative administration (1979 – 1997) deployed contracting arrangements in regeneration programmes including City Challenge and Single Regeneration Budget. During the 1990s, bidding processes managed by local authority departments or by arms length regeneration partnerships also sought to commission services from voluntary organisations. These processes continued under the Labour administration (1997 – 2010), which sought to involve them as 'partners in delivery' in public services such as neighbourhood renewal, employment, and children's services. The Conservative-Liberal coalition (2010 -) developed these processes further in ever wider fields of social provision and continued the push towards loan finance, social impact bonds, the Big Society Bank, social impact bonds, an ethical stock exchange and deeper privatisation of public services, including the post office. We stand a step away from the scenario of a fully fledged speculative stock exchange which financialises social programmes funds. Along the way there has been growing direct competition between large charities, and between them and private sector consortia.

By the new century government contracts for organisations involved in, for example, programmes for the unemployed or recycling schemes, were being increasingly 'bundled' into larger units covering wider geographical regions and with a greater range of services, which meant only very large national organisations in either the third or private sector could bid. It was observed that this tendency meant smaller city or neighbourhood based voluntary organisations were simply used as junior sub-contractors for less resources further down the contracting chain (Aiken, 2006). This process has also been noted for its negative affect upon BME organisations which were often small in scale (Lipman, unpublished).

A local social economy?

In this respect, it is useful to understand the optimistic vision envisaged a generation ago by Hirst, as leaders of large charities and social enterprises indirectly appeal to these ideas today. He imagined a local social economy built on 'associationalist' lines. This would be a decentralised welfare state involving two principles. The first aimed to 'devolve the provision of public welfare and other services to voluntary self-governing associations' and, second, 'to enable such associations to obtain public funds to provide such services to their members' Hirst (1994:163). However, arguably, both propositions have been turned on their head. On the first principle, organisations have been contracted to deliver highly specified centrally determined services thus weakening the notion of a 'devolved' self-determining, self-governing ethos. Concerning the second principle, provision has only rarely been fundamentally led and designed by mutual providers organising for their members, but rather they have been co-opted into delivering

services for clients specified by government. With both principles the direction of the arrow has reversed from bottom-up to top-down.

The fall of additionality?

The contracts of today are qualitatively quite different in character to funding streams even in the 1980s. Of course, the ingredients inside the wrapper of 'contracts' were not always identical. In the early 2000s, small 'grants' were rebranded 'contracts' with, initially, minimal changes to conditions. However, nowadays it is becoming rarer for voluntary organisations to be seeking funds for 'additionality' or 'complementary' purposes as outlined by Beveridge. Contracts are not simply a different mechanism to achieve complementary or additional provision. They are now about taking over large elements of mainstream public services.

Today, contracting is seen as the norm - a 'natural' route to 'acquire financial resources' for large, medium - and even small - voluntary sector endeavour. Many large and medium sized charities are seeking to take central roles - via contracts – in the heart of hitherto public sector service. Mocroft (2009) pointed out that, under the Labour government there were complaints of funding cuts while expenditure on the sector, although complex to measure, appeared to be going up. He shows that this was partly because the government funded new organisations (hubs etc); but large sums also went to national organisations for service delivery: an estimated £280m went to NCH, Barnardo's and the Children's Society; 'Mencap is recorded as receiving £136m in "trading, fees and contracts" '; and hive-offs of local authority housing departments further inflated the apparent 'income' of the voluntary sector (Mocroft, 2009:6).

Local government funding

Local government makes more use of the voluntary sector than central government but relies predominantly for income on the centrally determined revenue support grant. Best estimates of local government spent on the broad voluntary sector amount to '…about 4% in 2003/04 (excluding housing), with spending concentrated on adult social services, children, families and education' (Mocroft, 2009:4). These are areas in which CSGs are most active but these are also settings, particularly for non-statutory services, where local authorities have looked, since 2010, for savings. Of course local authorities also use contracting mechanisms.

Different voluntary sectors in context

For the broad voluntary sector, this suggests an uneven picture, though one in which some large elite charities are contributing, wittingly or unwittingly, to the wholesale privatisation of state services, competing for large contracts directly (often unsuccessfully, as in back-to-work programmes) against private sector organisations. Indeed certain large charities are quite explicit about their ambitions. The Chief Executive of Tomorrow's People publically stated that she could find no essential difference between themselves and a private sector business (Radio 4, 2013). Some large VSGs may profit, for a time, from being the 'useful idiots' acting as 'bid candy' (in colloquial terms) for private sector organisations - until the market logic of economies of scale takes its toll. Meanwhile, although the figures are difficult to assess, smaller Community Service Groups are continuing to face reductions in income from local authorities. What funding remains is likely – even for those engaged in very localised cultural or welfare activities – to be poorly paid sub-contracted work at the bottom of the contracting chain.

Another implication of contracting is that highly specified sets of activities, outputs and outcomes are required – in line with business practices - with a voluntary organisation acting as a direct agent of the state. This trend can even be witnessed in 'novel' areas barely in the policy spotlight, such as community composting (Slater and Aiken, 2014). The result is that voluntary services are no longer offered on a voluntary and self-determining basis, but according to the prescribed agenda of a state or a private sector 'welfare market'.

Arguably, in the early days of the marketisation process some aspects of a voluntary culture were easier to maintain. This included co-operation between organisations, maintaining robust advocacy roles with statutory agencies, undertaking the integration of project users into local life beyond contractual obligations, potentially undertaking community development work (Aiken and Bode, 2009; Cairns et al, 2010). Some of this remains in evidence and can even be a 'special quality' (or 'bid candy'), cited in applications and marketing materials. Nevertheless, even for organisations anxious to avoid becoming a delivery agent, the pressure on finance and staff time remains acute. At times, it appears that there is a total alignment of aims and vocabulary between the voluntary sector 'agent' and the statutory 'principal' in relation to 'clients.' Indeed in some local authorities there is 'a wider shift in operating culture' and pressure on groups (Milbourne, 2013:80). Meanwhile Matthew Scott, the director of the Community Sector Coalition, noted in 2009, the prominence given to contracting organisations when the Compact was revised, arguing that it '...is not relevant to community groups....what we have is a Compact for third sector subcontractors' (Little, 2009).

Cutbacks

Central government and local authorities have both initiated cutbacks. For example, the Economist, reported that by 2018 fixed central departmental spending - excluding social security, '...will have fallen by some £85 billion, or 21%, from its 2009 peak...' and goes on to quote the Institute for Fiscal Studies as saying that 'Britain will have undergone the fifth-largest cuts programme of 29 advanced economies' (Economist, 2013). Provisional funding settlements for local councils for the years starting 2011 and 2012 showed 36 councils, taking a cut of 8.9% covering some of the poorest areas in the UK – Hackney, Tower Hamlets, South Tyneside and St Helens (Guardian, 2010). Individuals disadvantaged by the economic crisis have been subject to 'welfare reform' entailing benefit reductions and 'harsh sanction systems (including 100% benefit penalties)' (Wright 2013:30). It was left to Cardinal Nichols, of the Catholic Church, to highlight that: 'The basic safety net, that was there to guarantee people would not be left in hunger or in destitution, has actually been torn apart' (Macintyre, 2014:1).

Big Society

Layered over this picture of the contract culture and cutbacks, is the 'Big Society', an agenda launched by the Coalition Government in 2010. This agenda was summarised by the Conservative Party as comprising three main components. First, ' ...public service reform... to enable social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups to play a leading role in delivering public services...'; and second, '...to empower communities to come together to address local issues. For example...empower communities to take over local amenities such as parks and libraries that are under threat...'; and third, '...a lasting culture change to support the work of neighbourhood groups, charities and social enterprises...mass engagement: a broad culture of responsibility, mutuality and obligation...' (Conservative Party, 2010: 1).

We can now read this vision quite specifically, and starkly, in terms of our themes: first, *all* parts of the broad voluntary sector are to be engaged in delivering public services; second, at a local level, Voluntary Service Groups and Community Service Groups are *expected* to be running hitherto public services endangered by cuts introduced by government; and third a permanent change in culture is desired which will *require* Voluntary Service Groups, Community Service Groups and others to take on responsibilities and obligations and do so, presumably, in a spirit of mutuality in the face of a retreating government.

Ishkanian's (2014:3) analysis points out that the ideas of Big Society '…should be seen as a neoliberal type of policy or one which has a clear family resemblance…' as it is based on '…rolling back the state, supporting the infiltration of market-driven calculations in the design and implementation of social policy and propounding the emphasis on individual initiative, enterprise and responsibility.' Her examination of endeavours to combat domestic violence cites the work of various authors to argue that, despite apparent government policy, cuts in public spending have actually led locally to reductions in resources, uneven provision and that populist decision-making has worked against the rights of minorities (Ishkanian, 2014:8).

Table 1: A Big Surprise for Big Society?

There were plans in 2010 to re-launch the government's 'Big Society' project with a series of meetings around the country. The first meeting in Stockport attracted around 200 people but it did not turn out as planned. The series was '…abandoned after the first event ended in acrimonious exchanges over spending cuts…People had thought it an opportunity to raise concerns about wider public policy issues such as local planning matters, council policies and cuts.' It was reported that Steve Moore, the main organiser of the Big Society Network remarked ruefully ' "It wasn't really working to have a big, open public meeting where people were discussing the cuts…." ' (Brindle, D., 2010).

At a broader level, the Baring's panel (2013:8) expressed the view that the voluntary sector was being treated as 'interchangeable with the private or public sectors – potentially a mere arm of the state, a delivery agent or sub-contractor without an independent voice.' They found examples from Community Matters' membership that suggested highly defined contracts restricted smaller organisations from meeting needs essential to their purpose. A year later the same panel went further and reported a 'chilling effect' whereby 'voluntary organisations reported "self censorship", citing fear of the loss of state contracts, concerns about appearing "too political" or gagging clauses in state contracts' (Barings (2014:7). Perhaps these reports indicate arenas in which Community Service Groups are shirking their 'responsibilities' and 'obligations' towards the Big Society? After all, the three part Big Society agenda sketched above gives no suggestion that they should be voicing dissent or taking independent voluntary action activities! However, events in Stockport may not be unique (see Table 1) in showing how *Big Surprise* can take the place of *Big Society.*

Summary

The post-war ideas about grants and the role of voluntary organisations as contributing additionality, have given way to contracting processes that turn on the head ideas of locally determined services and self-determining organisations. The central government funding that remains, after sharp cutbacks, has not filtered through to CSGs. Meanwhile, overall funding to local

government, which has been an important source for CSGs has been reduced – particularly in many poor areas. Individuals face cutbacks in entitlements and sanctions that threaten the safety net. Big Society is set out as part of the solution and CSGs are not immune to the requirements of the market. CSGs' residual caretaker role looks set to grow as they are placed in the invidious position of deciding whether or not to pick up the pieces from a 'broken society' by taking on public services on a voluntary basis. The threat looms that the culture of voluntary action, self-determination, free association and additionality will be increasingly lost even for small CSGs.

3. The Features of CSGs and VAAs

Community Services Groups (CSGs)

The term 'Community Services Group' does not provide a rigid category but we find it is a useful descriptor on a spectrum of organisations in order to understand the changing shape of voluntary services. First, conventional measures (Charity Commission, 2013; Kane, D. et al., 2013) define 'small' and 'micro' organisations as those with incomes, respectively, below £100,000 and £10,000 per annum and we consider CSGs would largely fall within this range. Second we also know the majority of these organisations are engaged in providing services of some kind – an issue we discuss shortly. This provides two aspects as starting points but does not provide the boundaries for a sharp analytic category: size and services alone cannot delineate CSGs. Some of the community associations within membership of Community Matters would, for example, fit under the conventional definition of 'small' and are delivering services. Many of the groups that use their facilities would be accommodated within the income criteria of 'micro.' However, it would be absurd to consider an organisation suddenly *not* a CSG because in one year its income was £1 over an arbitrary financial threshold if its purposes and activities had remained largely unchanged. The purpose, ways of working and range of idiosyncratic activities are a crucial aspect, however, these may be fuzzy, informal and hard to pin down precisely. In fact, they may deliberately resist attempts either to streamline and simplify their endeavours or to take a purely 'business-like' approach.

Earlier some examples were sketched of the organisations being highlighted in this category. Davidson and Packham's (2012:22) examination of 215 groups with incomes under £50,000 covered organisations that called themselves community groups, voluntary organisations, tenants and residents' groups, and neighbourhood groups. At first sight, we would place all of these within the CSG grouping. Aiken, Baker and Tarapdar (2011) considered community associations, which ran community buildings (with incomes between £38,000 to just under £600,000). Most of these organisations we would consider CSGs while some of the larger associations seeking contracts, often as part of consortia, in pursuit of organisational survival, we would exclude from the CSG category. These organisations acted as a host to many much smaller, informal, social, leisure and activist groups that used the facilities within the building. Examples included - the dance class, a Bengali elders' group, a welfare rights project, a self-help healthy eating project, and a mutually run food co-op. Some of these are similar to Soteri-Proctor's (2012) 'below the radar groups' – and are to be seen as CSGs unless they become groups of pure family or private friends: we are interested in some degree of public openness. In a study of community buildings Aiken, Taylor and Moran (2011) proposed three categories to indicate different development trajectories. 'Stewards' (e.g. a typical small village hall) would be run by volunteers and were set on a modest maintenance path. 'Community developers' (e.g. a typical urban community centre or settlement) would have paid staff and be involved in some partnership and contracting arrangements with the local

authority. 'Entrepreneurs' (e.g. a typical small to medium sized Development Trust) would seek involvement in contracting processes, acquisitions and expansion with professional staff.

Our interest here is in a fuzzy line drawn around most of the 'stewards', many 'community developers' and a small number of the 'entrepreneurs.' Interestingly, the work of many of these multi-purpose associations cross thematic categories of 'services', undertaking, for example, recreation, social services and advocacy (Kendall, 2003:23), thus providing scope for integration of services for disadvantaged people – something that may be lost in narrow contracting processes.

Voluntary Action Activities: closer up

Voluntary action activities may be even more diffuse than CSGs – the 'organisation' may be greyed out behind a loose knit and interchangeable group of activists concerned about local issues. An important point to make about many voluntary action activities is that they are not conducted in an instrumental way – they are less like menial 'labour' but more like enriching 'work' to adapt Arendt's (1998) usage. They may originate or take place within a community building but they may depend on an organisation to host them. Many VAAs are carried out in informal or individualistic ways, so although they will be organised, they may not be organisations. They may be for fun or for mutual benefit but there is not necessarily any profit sought from the activity. Examples include Eid celebrations or events for the Mexican Day of the Dead and the summer street party, all of which attract an informal network of neighbours helping each other out. They are not activities undertaken in order to accrue profits even if some collections are made to cover costs. They are usually seen as a 'good' in their own right: an expression of associational life, care and conviviality. At times they resemble 'self-organising networks' (Waterhouse and Scott, 2013:1). Rural areas and fishing communities often appear rich in VAAs, especially mutual aid, which may occur outside any formal setting (Douthwaite, 1996).

Lohman's (1992;63) notion of 'the commons' comes close to the idea of VAA at times. He cites 'groups of people who understand one another' and may be 'organised both informally…through a common worldview, and formally though associations' (Lohman 1992;63). The commons includes endeavours such as 'celebrations, ceremonies, rituals and observances' (Lohman 1992;61) or 'any social space for interaction within a community' (Lohman 1992: 62). Unfortunately, Lohman, sometimes equates voluntary action as *any activities* undertaken by any formally constituted voluntary (or gigantic not-for-profit) organisation. This undermines the broader notion of VAAs he could have developed. It also ignores the way that actions from social movements or belief systems (such as feminism, anti-racism etc) can potentially galvanise action in any organisation or sector.

There will be no ultimate agreement on which is the most important elements of VAAs. However, the aspects of VAAs of most interest for this paper are sketched in a working framework in Table 2 below. They draw on a variety of disparate sources including Beveridge (1948), Kendal (2003); Lohman (1992); Rochester (2013); Smith (2000) and others. They also arise from discussions within NCIA while developing this paper. We are not suggesting that the bundle of listed items is necessarily always achieved or explicitly expressed.
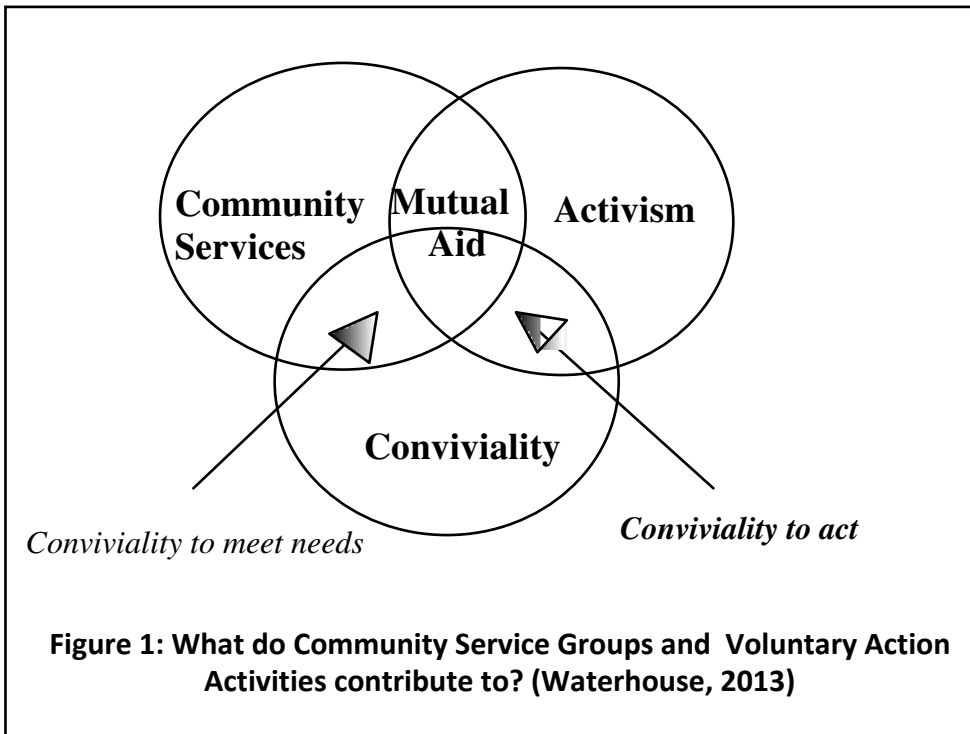
Putting the picture together: why CSG and VAA are important

It is now time to consider how these different ideas are put together and why they are important. The realm in which CSGs and VAAs operate can be encompassed by the idea of voluntary action, which NCIA (2011) describes as:

'…a check and balance to the state and other powerful interests; spot gaps in community needs, test out new ways of meeting these…; [and] provide an ungoverned space for citizens and residents to come together – outside of state control and the pressure of markets – to enjoy each others company and join in activities, whether simple conviviality, leisure, solidarity and assistance, personal or social change.'
(NCIA, 2011:1)

It is important to note that, though some CSGs may engage in tackling root causes of community pressures, challenging the status quo and designing alternatives – many do not. Waterhouse and Scott's (2013) exploration of dissent and activism focuses on that theme in greater detail. Sites where mutual aid, community services, and activism may co-exist or coincide are brought together in a framework depicted in Figure 1. Three aspects, conviviality, community services and activism may combine in different ways to meeting needs, albeit with different flavours. When put together in certain ways these aspects may offer conviviality capable of building social change - where 'conviviality' is understood as '…the simple enjoyment of being with others living in the same area or sharing a common interest' (Waterhouse 2013:6). In that sense the realm of CSGs and VAAs represent latent potential for broader action or change although this may not always be achieved, nor is this an instrumental aim. There are links here to Evers' (2013) idea of civil society being more than a set of organisations but also being a disposition towards building civility between citizens.

Figure 1: What do Community Service Groups and Voluntary Action Activities contribute to? (Waterhouse, 2013)

What we mean by 'services'

The discussion of 'services' here is not in the sense of 'contracted out public sector services' - but smaller scale 'additionality' services for the community. At a basic – but crucial – level, offering rooms for rent in a community centre is a service, as is organising a drop in café for young parents or organising a street festival. As Chanan (2003) - cited in Crawley (2006:16) - pointed out: 'The community sector role has not traditionally been regarded as a service, because community solutions make the service invisible by dissolving it into mutuality.' These kinds of 'services' are in many cases not 'delivered', they may not even be 'recorded' or 'costed' or be understood by 'beneficiaries' as something they have 'received.' These can be understood as voluntary action activities undertaken by volunteers doing this as part of a civic and convivial role in their community. It also should not be assumed that these 'community services' are always undertaken to a given specification. They are likely to reflect, warts and all, the community from which they arise: there is no guarantee of professionalism because this is not the aspiration nor the expectation. Clearly, for a medical operation we will expect the highest professional skill. For a coffee and cake morning for isolated elderly people in a rural community centre there is unlikely to be a demand for a Macdonalds-style standard service laced with insincerity. The authenticity of the volunteer at the urn may represent a much more important ingredient of this service!

Challenges

Rochester (2013:231) argued that voluntary action, as expressed by CSGs or VAAs in our terms here, has been subject to co-option and distortion. 'Rather than agitating for social change; identifying social needs and devising ways of addressing them; and providing arenas for conviviality, expressive behaviours and mutual support…[voluntary action has] been recast…to deliver public services on behalf of government…'

Another challenge to the notion of contracted out public services comes from Rhodes (2008:2) who points out that the approach to supporting people is increasingly framed in a language of

'professional control', 'cost' and 'delivery' while the milieu is 'services and services are commodities' which are underpinned by 'systems and managerialism'. This has been disempowering, for example, to people with disabilities who need support but do not want to be construed as 'service users.' Others have pointed out that 'commissioning and procurement have become a barrier to community sourcing' (Howells and Yapp, 2013:2) and that, even within a commissioning framework there is much more that could be done to support local action in this work. Indeed personalised budgets and citizens pooling their resources can be viewed as negative if understood as a consumerist approach to welfare.

However, Clarke and Newman (1997:126) also argue that there is a 'dispersal' of public services taking place, which is 'a complex and not simple process.' These may provide routes into mutual aid that could benefit voluntary action. A report on the experience of disabled and older people considered projects which sought to pool individual budgets which could act as 'a shift from thinking about people as "service users" to thinking about people as "citizens"' through an approach that 'focuses on local people and relationships rather than structures and systems' and did not rely on fixed organisations (Sass and Beresford, 2012). Here we see attempts to re-instate Hirst's (1994) second principle discussed earlier.

Summary

Community Service Groups and Voluntary Action Activities do not have a simplistic boundary. However, CSGs are likely to be organisations with incomes below £100,000 and most will be much smaller. They will be engaged in community services – as described above – and conviviality.

4. Challenges and Opportunities for CSGs and VAA

The contextual section pointed to broader changes taking place across the voluntary sector particularly the growth of commissioning, marketisation and privatisation of public services; and Big Society's aims to abrogate to local people the responsibility for what will not be covered by the privatised parts of the welfare state. A definitive picture cannot be presented about the impact these changes may be having on CSGs and VAAs. It may be prudent, however, not to wait for a 'fait accompli.' So, some 'bad' and some 'good' news is now posited, as a spur to action and engaged research. This section draws on: tendencies highlighted in this report, emerging evidence from the field, findings from elsewhere in this Inquiry, and intelligence from discussions with NCIA colleagues in 2013. Further evidence on these themes is welcomed.

The bad news

The gradual end of discretionary grants?
As discretionary grants gets sucked up into markets and contracts, the life-line of small sums of money may start to disappear, just when social needs for their services are on the increase. Based on their research on small groups in the North West, Davidson and Packham (2012:59) argued that many small groups: '... are delivering vital services to marginalised groups in deprived communities and are struggling now that their access to small grants has come to an end.'

Knock on effect for CSGs of cuts affecting local authorities and VSGs
The cumulative scale and reach of small groups should not be underestimated. The impact of changes to grant regimes can be extensive but there is also the 'the invisible knock-on effects of

loss of personnel in key agencies, loss of help in kind and increasing costs passed on by others agencies who are themselves trying to make ends meet' (Crawley and Watkin, 2011:12).

Vulnerable and fragile state of CSGs

Crawley and Watkin's (2011) research pointed to the vulnerability of many groups. Nearly half experienced difficulties in meeting basic running costs and identified the lack of core funding as a central preoccupation. When help was needed, over half turned to infrastructure bodies such as councils for voluntary service while over a third relied on a development worker from the local authority (Crawley and Watkin, 2011:5; 8, 10). Both these sources for support are fragile in the current climate. Indeed, informal support and use of local authority facilities, such as community spaces, have operated as hidden forms of assistance. Hence, the knock on effect of cuts to larger statutory or voluntary organisations may have an enormous effect on CSGs even through the sums involved may be quite small. Further, it is not clear whether political support can be expected from larger infrastructure bodies, who may not wish to champion small organisations if their own funding is endangered.

Needs increasing while CSGs struggle

CSGs may gain little from contracting processes, but they face increasing needs as welfare cuts take hold. Davidson and Packham (2012:4) in their research concluded that rising unemployment, cuts in service cuts accompanied by a higher cost of living presented a double threat to both CSGs and the communities they served: '…increased demand for the services and resources provided by small VCS groups, particularly those working with "disadvantaged" groups, but that crucially these groups are struggling to survive.'

Political conflicts for CSGs: collude with public service cuts by playing Big Society?

There is also emerging evidence about the political dilemmas faced by CSGs and VAAs, when confronted by withdrawal of public services – as to whether to play 'Big Society' and either take over such services, or accept their loss, or alternatively, to offer a *Big Surprise* and confront national and local government about these cuts. For example, reports in 2012 suggested that over 100 libraries had shut, with a further 600 facing closure or transfer to community groups (Independent, 2012). There was a clear reluctance by one group of volunteers who were placed, in an invidious position when threatened by a library closure. They eventually decided to take over this vital community resource but at the launch they argued there was no reason to celebrate: they would now be 'running' it with no professional staff at a lower standard of service (Bucks Free Press, 2012).

Welfare cuts threaten CSGs and VAAs

Many CSGs and VAAs – particularly those based on mutual aid - depend on individuals who are, themselves, under pressure in their own lives. Thus a parents' self help playgroup, women's mental health group, or an elderly person's discussion group offering informal support, may be easily ruptured by benefit changes or lack of premises. The disappearance of such organisational activities would mean that the stock of voluntary action activities providing a service to a community would, literally, have no-where to go. Lipman's (unpublished) report for NCIA on BME groups providing day centre activities for older people in London commented that 'the personal budgets their members were receiving were so small that they could no longer afford to come to the centre…[but had to] use the budget for home care services'. One result was that their members no longer benefited from wider activities such as socialising and accessing information and advice.

Cross-party consensus on commissioning is damaging CSGs and VSSN?

Where CSGs do engage with commissioning processes at the lower end of the stream they face dangers of overly prescribed and specified work, which endangers the ethos by which they have functioned. Current philosophies of the centre left and centre right appear to share a broad consensus based on a neo-liberal approach. This has meant that 'governments of all parties since 1979, have seen local government and other local forces as sources of non-market interference with their own marketization project' (Crouch, 2011:22), which has squeezed the space for independent voluntary action at a local level and the ethos of these organisations.

Welfare policies may heighten individual competition rather than solidarity

In addition, there are potential threats to building solidarities between disadvantaged people in local groups. Wages, trade union rights and even welfare benefits may be structured so that poor people need to compete against each other to lower their own conditions, relative to their equally deprived neighbour so as to not lose out entirely. As George (2013:112) argues: 'solidarity among victims of austerity policies can, through competition for tiny advantages…[be rapidly converted to] …become part of the "war of all against all" and strengthen individualism.' Mutuality and conviviality may be collateral long term victims of such processes thus undermining the raw material upon which associational life can grow.

Bid candy but jam tomorrow?

VSGs and larger CSGs can find themselves used as 'bid candy' in voluntary or private sector consortia contracts. There are indications from informal discussions with practitioners that, once the contract is won, little money trickles down to CSGs and onerous monitoring systems distract from work with beneficiaries. The nature of commissioning can have a particularly negative effect on the work of small organisations. There were reports that such groups were, like their larger professionalised voluntary service cousins, chasing funder requirements rather than retaining their own focus on needs with the result that 'values are "squeezed out" in the organisations' drive to succeed' (Crawley, 2006:16).

Lack of connections between CSGs: the wrong sort of infrastructure?

Finally, for smaller groups NCIA (2013:2) has pointed to some of the gaps, lack of scale and connection with larger organisations or umbrella groups that could be in a position to push issues forward:

 'Local social action is often fragmented, fragile and small scale…There was an absence of professionalised voluntary agencies involved in local struggles…established umbrella groups were uneasy or ambivalent.'

Are infrastructure organisations building connections and analysis between CSGs in order to advocate against cuts and for the disadvantaged? Or are they becoming shadow councils, too close to the corporate public face of local authority interests?

CSGs may be damaged by the collapse of large VSGs

Medium and large (VSGs) may, temporarily, gain from the new contracting opportunities. This would explain their great appetite for the emerging regime as typified, in the extreme, by ACEVO's Stephen Bubb's demands for 'greater "reforms" and outsourcing especially in the health service' (2013a; 2013b). VSGs like the 'business facing' Tomorrow's People may follow the same track. However, their expansion and enthusiasm may be temporary. The logic of the competitive market clockwork suggests successive amalgamation, or bankruptcy, is equally likely, in the face of

competition and the economies of scale offered by large multi-national companies. Where CSGs have gained pockets of support or resources from VSGs, these may be damaged by collapses or organisational retrenchment.

VAAs threatened by a decline of CSGs?

Voluntary Action Activities may not always require large resources; nevertheless, the absence of meeting spaces, shared resources and locations where CSGs gather may endanger the vibrancy and historical lineage of voluntary action. It has long been argued that there are areas where there appear to be clusters of activity, and similarly, areas where such developments may be sparse (Lindsay, 2013). Removing the infrastructure represents a perilous experiment with the support lattice supporting VAAs. How far the virtual realm can replace face-to-face VAAs is not clear.

The good news?

CSGs: A healthy separation between public service delivery and advocacy?

It is nearly a generation ago since Knight (1993) argued that a separation would need to develop between organisations delivering public services and smaller leaner organisations specialising in advocacy, campaign work and mutual support. There are some suggestions of growth in CSGs and VAAs through new ways of organising. A report by the Federation of Community Development and Learning (2011:3) argued that:

'…against the backdrop of ever increasing inequalities in society and widespread anguish and distress caused by the financial system and governments' policies….we have seen people in many parts of the world, particularly young people, demonstrating new ways of organising collectively to achieve change and social justice.'

Too small to fail?

The damaging effect of the decline in grants for CSGs was clearly spelled out by Davidson and Packham's research, however, the argument is sometimes put that these organisations may be 'too small to fail'. With low overheads and few staff they may be better able to weather austerity than large VSGs. Davidson and Packham's (2012:59) research did ponder whether some small groups '…are insulated from the cuts due to their independence from public funding…' Many CSGs are not involved in contracting and hence protected (for now) from the contract culture. The path of the heroic pauper needs to be considered, but it is not a course that Davidson and Packham or NCIA authors recommend. This perhaps represents bad 'good news'.

Foundation grants to CSGs

Research was recently undertaken on a funding programme supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation in the South West, which led to the disbursement of grants valued at around £500 to 122 organisations. It was found that over 83,000 people benefited in some way from this programme either as beneficiaries or volunteers; meanwhile 44% of the organisations had an annual income of less than £5,000 and nearly a third had no paid staff (Crawley and Watkin, 2011:5; 7). Such programmes show promise and illustrate how far relatively small grants may go for CSGs. Nevertheless, even the biggest foundations could not support well in excess of 52,000 small voluntary organisations or 84,000 even smaller groups cited earlier (NCVO, 2013).

CSGs and VAAs linked to activism and social movements

Hope has been expressed in some quarters for an upsurge in dissent, mutual aid and civil action with the 'vital ingredients of a vibrant social movement approach…[with] a mass base and direct

stakeholder involvement in decision making…shaping policy at a local, national and global level' (Powell, 2013:209). Church Action on Poverty (2012) continued this theme arguing that:

'… a movement of churches, Christians and grassroots community activists to speak out against the unjust and unequal distribution of wealth…mobilising thousands to Give, Act and Pray for change…have supported hundreds of people to become active leaders in disadvantaged communities…'

This chimes with activities to shift the political narrative. Powell (2013:164) saw protests by *los indignados* in Spain*,* the *Outraged* in the USA*,* and the *Aganakismenoi* in Greece as starting to 'reinsert "inequality" into the public debate' and to demand 'greater participation by citizens in decision-making'.

Ordinary glory?

NCIA describes a groundswell of social activism appearing at local level, despite the absence of VSGs (NCIA, 2013). However, many CSGs and VSAs are not geared to activism on a broad front. For this reason it is easy to overlook the more modest 'ordinary glory' of many mundane, steady groups and activities, which may yet outlive the current political consensus in relation to marketisation. The characteristics of those CSGs and VAAs - still alive, if not well - may promise to ignite community solutions as an antidote to marketised community services. For this reason support and solidarity to sustain community action remains important.

In summary

The emerging picture is of CSGs and VAAs under threat from reductions in funding, already meagre, while larger voluntary organisations may no longer be able to offer advice or informal support. Meanwhile this constituency may be left to pick up the pieces, faced by increasing numbers of disadvantaged people with decreased resources. The attention of infrastructure organisations, where they survive, may increasingly be towards contracting at scale. They may have less resources or political inclination towards smaller groups particularly if the latter do not adopt 'business principles.'

5. Implications and action

In conclusion, how can we build a stronger future for Community Service Groups and Voluntary Action Activities? The scenario sketched for 2020, in Table 3 below, provides a context to consider implications and actions for the future. It may seem bleak and in any dystopian vision there will be ruptures, and opportunities for dismantling. However, much of this scenario is depressingly close.

Strengths and limitations

This scenario can be used to consider implications for CSGs and VAAs. In short, what can they offer? Faced with large scale retrenchment of public services, the answer might be: not very much. But when the poor have so little, a little can mean a lot.

At their best, there are strengths CCGs and VAAS NCIA can offer:

- Groups that are locally based which build connections between people and offer refuge
- Groups that are not co-opted by the prescriptions of contracts

- Services that are informal, mutual, non professionalised and accessible
- Services that provide 'additionality' and in some cases 'last resort' support
- Activities which enact solidarity, shared understanding and common analysis
- Activities based on social relationships and mutual aid where 'user' & 'provider' overlap
- Surprise and creative collective invention! Stepping stones to activism.

At their worst their limitations may mean they offer:

- Groups that are inward looking, clubby & isolated
- Groups that start to follow the demands of funding programmes
- Activities that may be conventional, conservative or confining
- Activities that do not build collective action or seek broader understanding of inequalities
- Services that are internally convivial but this conviviality is not extended to the ' other'
- Services that are highly restricted due to the absence of public spaces to enact them
- Resignation and despairing individualism! Retreating barricades for survival.

Actions

This report does not offer a conclusion. It aims to provide part of a continuing discussion. The following ideas offer some whistles to kick off those debates. It assumes a 'we' and not a 'they.'

Community Service Groups and Voluntary Action Activities

There will be pressures for us to move into the contractual market place, as the neo-liberal project exerts a relentless pressure. It will be important to harness our resources: give attention to understanding our history, and values; developing an advance 'political' awareness; connecting with allies in convivial ways – in all sectors; being aware of our symbolic and moral power; sticking to what we do well and like doing; avoiding activists' self-exploitation; undertaking services and activities through mutual aid, activism and resistance to the consensus; maintaining fun; focussing on creative 'work' and avoiding our conversion to professional 'labour.'

Foundations and funders

CSGs and VAAs need support. It may be financial – small amounts can go a long way for small groups. Public and moral support in the public sphere is also important – to champion without professionalising. Indirect support to their social and political environment is vital. Groups may be combating a lost bus route or saving a bridge, so money for top level legal advice may help; or facilitating linkages between allied groups; or standing up in ways that fit - and stretch – foundations' missions against those threatening risk taking CSGs and VAAs.

Voluntary Service Groups and infrastructure groups

Medium and large voluntary organisations can use their symbolic power and tangible resources to support CSGs with resources, equipment, intelligence or advice. They can adopt 'dissent' and speak out with CSGs. Some could campaign for VAAs and move into becoming CSGs to protect their mission and values.

Allies

There are trade unionists, dedicated professionals, local authority workers, people of faith, owners of small businesses and workers in multi-national companies. They also belong to associational life. They are not on duty on their time off. They can also take off their coat, roll up their sleeves, take on *Ordinary Glory* and contribute to *Big Surprise*.

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