

Introduction: Remixing the Economy of Welfare? Changing Roles and Relationships between the State and the Voluntary and Community Sector

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Social and caring services are provided in developed economies by statutory bodies, the market, the household and the voluntary sector in combinations that vary across time and place. This themed section is about the enrolment of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to achieve government agenda, including improved public services, community empowerment and building social capital. Mainstreaming of the VCS has profound implications for individuals (service users, volunteers and paid workers), and for organisations and communities. These articles are based on contributions to an ESRC seminar series 'Re-mixing the economy of welfare: what is emerging beyond the market and the state?' Individual seminars explored aspects of this reform, including variations across the nations of the UK, implications for volunteers and the concept of social value. Articles in this section address some of the diversity of VCS roles in communities and relationships with welfare policies, as well as direct public service delivery. Authors focus specifically on England, Scotland and France, while recognising international debates and developments.

Before we turn in more detail to the issues to be explored in this section, it is useful to comment briefly on labels and definitions. In the academy, as in the world of policy, no single term is used to capture that part of the economy beyond the public and private sectors. It is variously called the 'voluntary and community sector', the 'social economy', the 'Third Sector' and the more inclusive 'civil society', each of which has different nuances and different supporters. This contested nomenclature is significant because it reflects the diversity of the sector itself and the various claims to expertise that are not well established or widely accepted. For the sake of brevity, we adopt the term Voluntary and Community Sector (abbreviated to VCS) but other terms are invoked and explained as appropriate in context by authors in this section: for example, Third Sector, which gained official acceptance under New Labour; civil society, which is preferred by the current UK government; non-profit sector; and *economie sociale*, as used in the European Union.

Immediately before the 2010 UK general election, all the major political parties stressed the important role of the VCS in delivering public services (Alcock, 2010). The expansion of its responsibilities for welfare looks set to continue and intensify. One of the first acts of the coalition government in May 2010 was to launch the idea of

a Big Society, in which mutuals, cooperatives, charities and social enterprises should have much greater involvement in the running of public services. The coalition has also expressed commitment to volunteering, local solutions, decentralisation and democratic engagement. But all this is under conditions of spending cuts and reduced services – delivering more for less. Organisations from the sector (VCSOs) are said to be uniquely placed to innovate and improve outcomes, especially for groups that state agencies find hardest to reach. It is also contended that the distinctiveness and legitimacy of the sector are diminished when VCSOs choose to (or are constrained to) deliver to state agenda. Social enterprises and the trading arms of charities are also, it is sometimes claimed, becoming more like private sector enterprises in an environment of harder competition for funds. As a result, the categories of state, market or voluntary sector may have become less meaningful. The contributions to this themed section address implications for policy and practice of this aspect of welfare reform.

Hogg and Baines review academic and policy literature around the key conceptual and policy contexts associated with the mainstreaming of the VCS in public services. They recognise the powerful but contested claims around the distinctive qualities of the sector, and assess concerns about the erosion of distinctiveness against a background of more business-like practices and increasing demands for bureaucratic accountability. They focus upon England and the devolved administrations of the UK and contrast them briefly with other countries in the European Union (e.g. the Netherlands and Germany), where the sector has traditionally played a larger part in the post-war welfare state. They summarise the ways in which, although not entirely new in the UK, the role of the VCS intensified under New Labour with policies to broaden the supplier base in health and care, and significant investments in upskilling VCSOs to bid for and deliver contracts. This is positioned within debates about New Public Management (NPM) and notions of public value, which potentially challenge NPM. Explanatory frameworks include Wolch's (1990) 'shadow state' and Hodgson's (2004) 'manufactured civil society', highlighting the exertion of government power over VCSOs.

The UK no longer has a monolithic model of social welfare delivery and this is reflected in relations between the public, private and voluntary sectors. Danson and Whitham consider VCS organisations, including social enterprises, within the environment and institutions in Scotland, and they delineate differences and similarities across the UK. The agenda set at Westminster is tempered in Scotland, they argue, by a strong institutional framework and traditions of civic society. They anticipate a period of more significant divergence between England and Scotland, where the Big Society looks set to be rejected in favour of public sector domination with complementary VCS support.

The principles of the Big Society emphasize strengthening communities through volunteering. Activity that meets government definitions of 'formal' volunteering is unpaid, benefits people other than members of the volunteer's family and occurs within organisational structures. Informal volunteering, in contrast, is on a one-to-one basis. Public agencies often misunderstand and oversimplify heterogeneous modes of engaging in community self-help, especially in the less affluent neighbourhoods that are the targets of most policy interventions. Williams examines the implications and legitimacy of recent public policy approaches, drawing on quantitative data sets to argue that they need to be evaluated in the light of evidence for the complex mix of the social and the informal economy in contrasting types of community.

Joining up across statutory agencies is a requirement of central government, but, as a substantial literature now attests, is fraught with challenges and unfulfilled promises. The

safeguarding and sharing of personal information can be a significant tension between statutory agencies, and even more so when they engage VCISOs as partners and service providers. Wilson, Martin, Walsh and Richter use a 'wicked case' to explore some of the difficult dilemmas about information that VCS and statutory providers face in meeting their responsibilities to vulnerable young people and their carers. They consider the theory and practice of identity governance for current and future service co-ordination.

Partnership arrangements at local level involve public sector agencies and professionals working with various VCISOs, including marginalised community groups. As in other multi-agency environments, people from these different domains often struggle to find ways of bridging their respective 'social worlds' (Kagan, 2007). Issues of power, legitimacy and tokenism are emerging in the literature. Kagan and Duggan explore this theme by reflecting on the role of partners from higher education working with community groups, residents and regeneration professionals in the context of attempts to deliver on 'community cohesion' in the north of England. They discuss the benefits of using creative methods (film, storytelling, creative writing, photography and board games) for engagement across traditional boundaries.

Faith-based organisations have moved up the political agenda globally in recent years. They have been seen by governments as making a significant contribution to policy objectives, such as poverty reduction, community cohesion and combating extremism. The *économie sociale* in France has a much stronger secular tradition than the UK VCS. Montagné Villette, Hardill and Lebeau begin by exploring the changing relations between the French state and the *économie sociale*. They then contextualise this in a discussion of recent research with a charity underpinned by Islamic principles of giving that operates both overseas and within marginalised communities in Paris.

Much of the distinctiveness of the VCS is associated with its workforce. Unpaid workers – volunteers – are often seen as the lifeblood of the sector, although not all VCISOs involve volunteers and there are volunteers within other sectors of the economy. Volunteering has been heavily promoted in recent years as it has become aligned with various policy agenda: improving employability, promoting social cohesion and reversing disconnection from the public realm, and there are substantial and growing literatures on the topic. Relatively little has been written about volunteering in the context of the challenges facing VCISOs as they adapt to (or reject) new funding regimes, and respond to competition from the private sector as providers of services for those who can afford to pay. Bowlby and Lloyd Evans take a local perspective on these national transformations in policy and practice to examine how organisations that cannot afford paid workers struggle to retain volunteers in the face of many pressures, including the demands of paid work in the market.

References

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