

Third Sector Research Centre: a synthesis of responses from a consultation amongst VSSN members

The consultation amongst VSSN members on the Third Sector Research Centre was undertaken during the period 22nd Oct - 11th Nov 2007 and focused on six questions. This report identifies key issues raised under each question. For consistency we refer here to the 'third sector' or 'the sector' although it is worth noting that terminology remains contested. Several respondents preferred to use the terms 'voluntary sector', 'voluntary and community sector' or VCS.

Question 1:

In which areas would you say that evidence and argument on the Third Sector are strongest? In which areas are they weakest?

It was noted that much of the research on the third sector has been driven by the availability of funding and changing policy interests and directions, hence a longstanding focus on social service providing organisations and their role in mainstream public service provision. One consequence is that a great deal of voluntary endeavour has been under-researched.

There was some commonality of view of the strongest areas of research, evidence and argument on the third sector:

- collection and analysis of secondary data (e.g. by NCVO (Almanac), CAF and other sector based bodies and latterly through Guidestar), although the extent to which this is systematic and sustained was called into question;
- research on charitable giving, volunteering and social capital;
- applied research on, with and for voluntary organisations, primarily focused on organisational and managerial issues within the sector, generally employing qualitative research methods;
- recent work on the 'independence' of voluntary organisations and community groups and of the third sector from the state, including research on Compact relations;
- funding pressures on the sector/organisations within it;
- a heavy focus on urban third sector;
- the role and work of international NGOs.

There appears to be less consensus regarding areas of research and evidence thought to be weakest or in need of development. A comparatively longer list of issues was generated here:

- theoretical work on the sector – e.g. conceptual and definitional work – including using theory to inform research design;
- a suggested need to engage in normative debate about what the sector is for and contributes, including exploring the notion of 'civility';
- underdevelopment of critical interpretations of voluntary action;

- understanding of the role of the third sector in society as a whole, particularly from the perspective of the average person;
- a lack of focus on the hidden, everyday 'secret worlds' of voluntary action;
- a narrow focus on the individual organisation as the unit of analysis rather than relational, networked and ecological understandings of individuals and organisations;
- understanding of the motivation of individuals in relation to supporting the sector (as donors, volunteers, paid workers, taxpayers);
- the employment and working conditions of paid staff in voluntary organisations, especially within changing environments;
- understanding the 'darker side' of voluntary action: dysfunction (the third sector can be a locus of harm) and to the schisms and divergences within the sector, including scale and organisational 'turf wars';
- diversity issues;
- effectiveness of process in relation to strategic and other partnership working;
- insufficient attention to time (evolutionary approaches, longitudinal approaches) and space/geography (inconsistent mapping work, spatial variation, the impact of place, rural third sector and research across the four UK nations);
- limited use of ethnographic approaches to throw more light on the detail and dynamics of the sector;
- comparative studies at intra and inter-sectoral levels.

Two areas of research were thought to be amongst the strongest areas by some respondents and amongst the weakest by others:

- international comparative work;
- impact studies: demonstrating the differences (positive and negative) made by voluntary action, including intangible outcomes and charting the processes and mechanisms through which these differences are created; despite making headway in recent years, it was thought that third sector organisations still have great difficulty providing convincing demonstrations of social and community benefits, although this was thought to be strong in particular fields of work.

Question 2:

What should be the research priorities of the new Third Sector Research Centre?

A strategic approach

Several respondents emphasised the need for a strategic starting-point, as opposed to launching into a public opinion-poll of favourite bullet-point topics. Substantive topics should emerge from programmes of research which followed strategic considerations. This should include:

- the development of sustainable databases for future research;
- theoretical and conceptual analysis to underpin policy and practice;
- sector engagement in promoting knowledge transfer and capacity-building;
- sector and international comparative research;
- the need to take UK-wide perspectives;
- the need to embrace the whole of the third sector.

There would be organisational implications of taking a more strategic approach: an initial centre would need to be put in place to do the work of developing the agenda and the programme, and then managing the bid process.

Agenda-building

Several other respondents drew attention to the need for theory and agenda-building in certain areas. These included:

- the relationship between the third sector and society, and questions of social justice including issues such as:
 - does the sector reproduce or redress existing inequalities?
 - the uneven potential of the third sector human resources in different areas
 - the meaning of paid and unpaid roles
 - associational links and issues of governance and democracy;
- the ecology of the third sector infrastructure and capacity-building;
- the impact of voluntary action, especially in relation to intangible outcomes;
- the impact of the public sector modernisation agenda on the sector;
- 'dark side' issues such as inclusion/ exclusion, competition;
- new and emerging areas of enquiry.

Smaller organisations

Several commentators emphasised the need to look at smaller voluntary organisations and community groups, including in the field of social enterprise, and the social and cultural diversity of the third sector.

Question 3:

What should be the role of the centre in developing research capacity?

Question 4:

What should be the role of the centre in developing the sector's own capacity to gather and utilise evidence?

Developing research capacity should be a key role for the Research Centre. Achievement of this, however, will depend both on resources (financial and human) and on the credibility of the Centre.

Beyond developing capacity through generating and promoting new types of research activity (particularly in terms of longitudinal research), there are two aspects of research capacity development, both of importance. The Centre should be concerned with developing research capacity within academia to enhance the study of the third sector, but also within the third sector itself. There was some question about the extent to which the Centre should take a leadership role in respect of developing research capacity in the third sector, in acknowledgement that some sector organisations also attempt to fulfil this function.

Suggested ways to develop research capacity within academia to study the third sector include:

- Supporting new researchers through mentoring, training and career development programmes;
- Funding and supporting a PhD programme through the Centre;
- Developing undergraduate teaching materials on the third sector;
- Establishing a visiting fellows programme (including international exchanges);
- Hosting seminar series – including an internal seminars series and international seminars;
- Enhancing interdisciplinary research;
- Developing a formal relationship with VSSN, as the membership body for third sector researchers;
- Encouraging others to fund strategic research on the third sector;

- Developing new types of research, particularly those that focus on the ‘bigger picture’ and taking a long term view so as not to duplicate existing short term empirical work currently widely undertaken.

Suggested ways to develop research capacity within the third sector include:

- Identifying and critically evaluating existing patterns of research practice and use within the third sector;
- Providing training to build knowledge and skills in research methods and design;
- Supporting greater understanding of building and utilising theory and developing ‘critical distance’ through training and mentoring;
- Providing a membership scheme for individual/independent researchers;
- Ensuring formal engagement and networking with and for sector based research agencies and individuals;
- Developing a mentoring and support programme for sector based (and independent) researchers.

Across both, there is a more specific need to build capacity in terms of:

- Developing different conceptual, theoretical and methodological approaches, enabling deeper analysis of research material, and helping to ensure researchers maintain a ‘critical distance’;
- Supporting a wider understanding of the literature and so knowledge is built cumulatively by fitting new research into existing findings;
- Ensuring research is effectively disseminated and communicated;
- Developing accessible, meaningful and ‘user friendly’ impact tools;
- Providing generic training on ‘an introduction to third sector research’ (including, for example, structure of the sector, legal framework, existing data sources and research areas, values, methods).

As noted above, however, in order to build capacity the Centre will first need to build its credibility, both across the academic world and the third sector. It will also need dedicated resources for this area of its work.

Question 5:

How should the Third Sector Research Centre be structured?

Several of the respondents endorsed a ‘hub and spoke’ model, in recognition of the diverse and dispersed nature of research in the field.

Desirable attributes of the hub were:

- the ‘hub’ to have a strategic role in determining the research strategy and programme
- the ‘hub’ to have a commissioning role
- to have its own research programme, in order to attract good quality researchers
- to be university-based to ensure academic leadership
- to build on existing expertise and institutions
- build on experience of other collaborative models for research
- good regional representation
- possible ‘two-hub model’
 - one focussing externally on interdisciplinary research
 - one focussing more internally on sector and inter-sector policy/practice

Governance issues were:

- transparency in relationships with key stakeholders
- the need for the Centre to be independent
- the need for academic and practitioner advisory committees.

The importance of the Centre having education and training functions, for academics and policy-makers/ practitioners, was raised.

Question 6:

Are there any other potential functions of this research centre?

The Centre could usefully include a number of additional functions:

- Ensuring sustained, long term research on the third sector: the Centre must be long term and sustainable – both in terms of the life of the Centre itself and the research it undertakes. The Centre should effectively provide a permanent base for research on the sector, going well beyond the current funding period. Fundamentally, the research the Centre undertakes must include longitudinal programmes (enabling, for example, continuous research into the impact of public policy initiatives on the third sector);
- Disseminating research findings – the Centre could have a role in both widely disseminating its own research and promoting and supporting the dissemination of wider research work on the field. It should employ a wide range of dissemination media, including supporting the development of a dedicated academic journal. Further, the Centre should support users (practitioners, policy makers and researchers) in accessing, understanding and utilising research findings (particularly qualitative findings which have traditionally been under-used by policy makers);
- Building networks – the Centre should have a role in both making links between itself and other key research agencies, programmes, networks and individuals which undertake, promote and support research in the field, but also in facilitating networking across these groups;
- Providing a research repository – through, for example, the development of a database, a ‘sign posting’ service, and/or a guide to the literature, the Centre could play an important role as a repository of research on the third sector;
- Developing education and training programmes for (inter-disciplinary) academics, policy makers and practitioners on third sector research.

However, while these functions could be significant it would be important not to overload the Centre or to dilute its core purpose. The focus of the Centre must be kept clear and adding too many functions may detract from this and so weaken its impact.

Compiled by Angela Ellis Paine, Rob Macmillan and Cathy Pharoah, 23.11.07