

The future of the voluntary sector -
lessons from the UK

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A turning point...

"The voluntary sector risks declining over the next ten years into a mere instrument of a shrunken state, voiceless and toothless, unless it seizes the agenda and creates its own vision.." Professor Nicholas Deakin
(author of the UK's Compact)

"We need to move from being simply 'campaigners' and 'doers' to becoming 'changemakers' and 'enablers'." Paul Farmer, CEO of Mind, now Chair of umbrella organisation for Charity CEOs, ACEVO

"We need a bolder charity sector...that fights with everything in us to avoid becoming the poverty industry.." Danny Kruger, CEO, Only Connect

Relationship with the state?

- The state wants the voluntary sector to help it cut costs, reshape services, engage with public
- Potential to deliver positive change
- But danger of "mission drift"
- Not just about money, but also much greater power of the state

Panel on the Independence of the Voluntary Sector

- Set up to review what was happening to independence
- Concluded there was a serious problem for:
 - **Independent purpose** – money must follow mission, not mission following the money
 - **Independent action** – action that pursues purpose and meets needs
 - **Independent voice** – ability to voice concerns about public services, not just deliver them
- For example, women's refuges

A challenging context

- State funding has become increasingly important
- Contract culture creates pressure to become less specialist, bigger, more managerial, like businesses
- Competition divides the sector
- Diversity, different interests, particularly between large and small, make it even harder
- Loss of distinctive identity
- Voice of the sector under particular threat

Particularly important now

- Democracy needs different voices and ways of expressing them; people expect more power to shape services and voluntary sector is a trusted channel; traditional politics in decline
- Disempowered need voices to speak up on their behalf, because services often don't work well for them, needs ignored
- State wants to find new ways of doing things, particularly around prevention

What is the solution?

- Underlying cause: loss of identity and respect for the distinctive contribution of the voluntary sector
- Sector must articulate where it adds value and set its own direction – collectively
- In UK, looking for a Commission on future of the voluntary sector

What makes the voluntary sector distinctive

- Able to generate community resources and strengthen communities
- Knowledge about what works, esp on prevention
- Often more “joined up”
- “Mutuality and reciprocity” in relationships
- A network and voice on behalf of marginalised
- But it is also becoming harder to define

Some reflections

“We have the capacity to act as a ‘currency converter’ between what the economist Edgar Cahn calls the ‘core economy’ of family, friendship and community, and the ‘cash economy’ where everyone and everything must be paid for.”

Kathy Evans, Children England, umbrella organisation for children’s charities

“Merciful, non-judgemental, believing in you, are not phrases anyone would commonly associate with state social security provision.... Voluntary organisations can justifiably occupy a different and complementary space.”

Chris Mould, Chairman, Trussell Trust, which operate food banks

Recovering the mojo

“I think the voluntary sector, to the extent that it is definable at all, has a responsibility to both comfort and disturb. We do the comforting well enough in 2014 but what of the disturbing? Ministers would have us say less but in truth we haven’t said enough...My first and biggest plea to the sector in the coming years – recover the mojo, raise the voice, revive the anger.” David Robinson, Community Links

Some ideas for a future direction

- Sector creating its own vision and agenda
- A clear mission: prevention, creating “agents of change,” working with others
- Social value much better recognised, supported
- ‘Local first’ as the default switch, power devolved
- Sector’s voice raised and heard, an effective Compact
- Co-designing better public services through more collaboration, less competition
- New kinds of funding

Some questions

- How will your voluntary sector evolve over the next 10 years?
- Are you facing a choice between campaigning and delivering?
- Between narrow organisational interests or working together to create common good in society?