

**Paper presented at:
The NCVO/VSSN Researching the Voluntary Sector Conference 2007,
University of Warwick**

**Contradiction or conformity? Voluntary sector activism in the UK
and New Zealand - a grassroots perspective***

*Dr Christine Milligan and Dr Richard Kyle, Institute for Health Research, Lancaster
University, UK*

***This research was funded by the ESRC (REF-000-23-1104)
Research Team: Dr C. Milligan, Prof Liz Bondi, Prof N. Fyfe, Prof R. Kearns,
Dr R.Kyle and Prof W. Larnar.**

Abstract

In this paper we draw on data from the first phase of a two year cross-national study that seeks to examine the material importance of place for understanding the interrelationship between government, voluntary organisations and activists. Based on questionnaire and interview material gathered in both the UK and New Zealand, we explore the extent to which organisations operating within the fields of mental health and community safety view themselves as being activist in intent and how this may have changed over time. Importantly, we examine how voluntary organisations understand the concept of 'activism' and the manner and extent to which this may shape their relationships with other actors. In a political climate that increasingly leans toward the development of partnership working and governance over government, we ask whether organisations are shifting away from those more demonstrative forms of activism prevalent in the latter half of the 20th century to more subtle and nuanced forms of activism. In doing so, we consider the extent to which this may be similarly or differentially manifest between the UK and New Zealand. We further consider whether the new spaces of political governance that have emerged within local government jurisdictions in recent years are recognised by activist organisations as key sites for the direction of their activity, or whether they continue to pursue more traditional avenues. In examining these issues we explore the extent to which there is apparent conformity in organisational views on activism and the focus of activist activity as well as some of the apparent contradictions.

KEYWORDS: Voluntary sector, activism, mental health, community safety

* corresponding author: e-mail: c.milligan@lancaster.ac.uk

1. Introduction

As Wilson (2000) and others have noted, although studies of voluntarism and social activism have developed somewhat independently, they nevertheless have much in common. Indeed, we maintain that in separating out these two spheres of study researchers run the risk of overlooking not only how and where different forms of activism develop, but also the social and political arenas in which they are played out. These are issues we have sought to bring together in a cross-national study that examines the material importance of place for understanding the interrelationship between government, voluntary organisations and activists. In this paper we draw on data from both the UK and New Zealand to examine one particular aspect of the study: that is, how voluntary organisations understand the concept of 'activism' and the extent to which organisations view themselves as being activist in intent. In a political climate that increasingly leans toward the development of partnership working and governance over government, we consider the extent to which organisations may be shifting away from more radical forms of activism prevalent in the latter half of the 20th century to more subtle and nuanced forms of activism.

Importantly, we explore the manner and extent to which voluntary activism may be changing over time and how this may be similarly or differentially manifest in the UK and New Zealand. We also examine the extent to which those new spaces of political governance that have emerged within local government jurisdictions in recent years are recognised by activist organisations as key sites for the direction of their activity. In addressing these issues we consider whether there may be an emerging consensus around the form and place of local voluntary sector activism or whether contradictions prevail.

2. Methodology

The study comprised four research phases. The first, a questionnaire survey of voluntary organisations working in the fields of Mental Health and Community Safety in Manchester and Auckland, was designed to gain a 'fix' on these sub-sectors in terms of each organisation's purpose, geographic reach, workforce size, volunteer strength, governance structure, funding source, activity, and inter- and intra-sectoral relationships. Moreover, the questionnaire addressed the organisations' attitude towards activism in both senses of the term: that is, i) how their organisation defined activism; and ii) how they positioned their organisation in relation to activism.

The survey response rate for the UK was 33%, representing 53 valid returns. Respective figures for New Zealand are 28% and 30. The questionnaires elicited largely quantitative data. Given the key aim of the survey was to act as a necessary 'first base' – a method through which to pinpoint further questions rather than provide definitive answers – analysis was through descriptive statistics using SPSS.

All subsequent research phases generated qualitative data. In the second, twenty-four semi-structured interviews with representatives of Voluntary Sector Organisations in both Manchester and Auckland were conducted. The third phase switched the focus to the Statutory Sector involving sixteen interviews in each country; three in each sector at Local Government Level, three per sector at a Regional level and a further four from Central Government. Finally, in phase four, activist biographies were conducted with twenty-four activists in each country. These biographies explored the

catalyst for their activism, any subsequent shifts between sectors, knowledge transfer and how/if the form of their activism changed over time, and their motivations for continued involvement. In sum, 128 interviews were carried out, 64 per country.

3. Research Findings

Establishing the foundation upon which our qualitative analysis builds, the first part of this paper outlines findings from the first phase of the research: the questionnaire survey of voluntary organisations. It proceeds in three sections, discussing in turn: i) organisations' definitions of activism; ii) organisational positioning along a spectrum of engagement; and, iii) the relationship between activism and partnerships.

3.1 Definition of Activism

Evidenced in both countries was an understanding of activism as both a process of adopting 'goal-oriented strategies' and of 'engagement with government and statutory agencies to influence'. In both the UK and New Zealand 'demonstrating or protesting' and 'working independently' as a method of bringing about social change or effecting influence over government policy and legislation appeared as paired responses at the foot of a ranked table of the six definition. Whilst on the surface a shift away from demonstrative forms of activism appeared evident, disaggregating this ranking revealed that whilst, in the UK, only four of the fifty-three organisations (7.5%) stated that demonstrating and protesting formed part of their definition of activism, in New Zealand this figure was substantially higher at 27%.

Also noteworthy is dissimilarity in organisations' level of dis-engagement from activism: 22.6% of UK-based organisations selected 'this organisation does not engage in activism, so does not have a definition' compared with only 6.7% in NZ. Moreover, when explicitly asked whether, according to their own definition, they considered their organisation to engage in activism, 58.3% and 72.1% of organisations in the UK and New Zealand, respectively, stated 'yes'. Collectively, these findings suggest that, though there may be a shared definition of what constitutes, organisations' positioning in relation to activism varies between countries.

3.2 Position re Activism

Respondents were invited to position their organisation on a spectrum with three key locations: 'working to change or improve 'the system' from outside' on the far left; 'working to change or improve 'the system' from within' in the centre; and, 'working within 'the system' to help it to continue to function as it is' to the far right. Unsurprisingly, almost all of the organisations that stated they did engage in activism were committed to change: 96.4% in the UK and 94.7% in New Zealand were located either in the centre or to the left of this position. The spread of responses in this half of the spectrum was, however, different. Broadly speaking, in New Zealand, organisations were more embedded in 'the system'. For example, where in the UK 25% of organisations positioned themselves in the centre, in New Zealand this figure stood at 36.8% - the most frequently selected position along the spectrum. In the UK, however, it was in the gap *between* the centre and far left that most organisations located themselves, with exactly half of all organisations doing so.

3.3 Activism vs. Partnerships

Of those organisations whose *raison d'être* was, at least in part, activism, 80% of UK-based and 52.6% of New Zealand-based organisations also engaged in partnership

working. This suggests that there may be a deeper level of involvement in activism in the UK. For example, though, atypical, one organisation in the UK was found to engage with fourteen different partnerships. More frequently, organisations engaged in between four and six partnerships, with almost half (46.4%) of all organisations falling into this category. In New Zealand, the maximum number of partnerships with which any one organisation engaged was six. Most (36.3%) engaged in between one and three partnerships, with 31.6% engaging in no partnerships at all. At only 26.3%, the number of New Zealand organisations falling within the 4-6 category was around half that of all UK respondents. Though this appears a striking contrast, restraint must be exercised in drawing conclusions from the survey analysis. As the qualitative evidence makes clear, any comprehensive understanding of these issues requires us to have a critical understanding of both the form and level of activism and the nature and structure of partnerships within these two countries.

Hence having considered how voluntary organisations, within this study, define activism and where they situate their own activism along an insider/outsider spectrum through a quantitative lens, we now turn to our qualitative data. Here, we begin to tease out the different forms that this voluntary sector activism takes, and consider what this tells us about the complex nature of activism and the places within which it is played out.

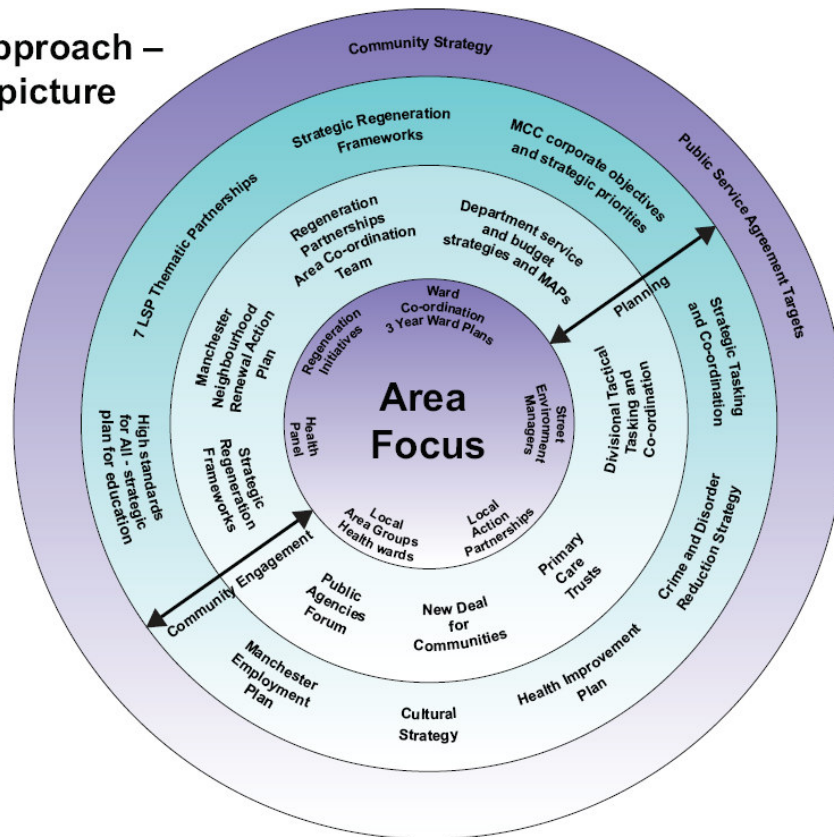
4) The place of voluntary activism within new Governance Structure

Markham and Bonjean (1995) maintained that whilst volunteers focus on the amelioration of individual problems, social activists orient their goals more toward social change. Yet, as we have already noted, voluntary organisations in this study, also viewed bringing about social change and influencing legislation as the primary definition of activism that they, themselves, work with. Lobbying to achieve these aims, whilst third on their list of definitions, showed a marked difference between the UK and New Zealand, raising questions about the different socio-political environment within which these two countries are embedded and the pathways and processes through which organisations are able to engage with the state.

One clear difference between these two countries relates to their conception of the notion of partnership working. In the UK, we have seen a marked shift in recent years towards new governance structures that bring together the statutory, voluntary and community, and private sectors within partnership bodies that sit between the state and its citizenry. Their role is to develop and implement strategies to address the needs of particular communities of interest, or of geographical locales. Here, we refer to the emergence of a wide range of formally constituted bodies such as the Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), with thematic partnerships such as the Crime and Disorder, Sustainable Neighbourhoods and Health Inequalities partnerships, Regeneration Partnerships and Local Action Partnerships etc.. As Figure 1 illustrates, these partnerships operate within a complex layering of strategy and engagement mechanisms that stretch from the local community to the metropolitan area. Each of these partnership structures are formally constituted with representation stretching from the local state to the local community.

Figure 1:

The area approach – the bigger picture



Source: www.manchesterpartnership.org.uk

Even with the recent (2007) change of leadership, the UK government continues to view these local governance structures as critical to future policy. As one key official in central government commented:

R: *Yes, I think it's very important actually. From what I can gauge from the snippets of new politics that we're getting from around the place, is that getting things right at the local level is more important than ever. So I think LAAs [Local Area Agreements] and those kinds of arrangements are not going to lose their influence.... as long as we have this government I don't think things will change. I think local level engagement will become more and more important. And third sector organisations have a key role to play in that.... So it's not going to go away as a key way of working.*

While the UK government clearly sees these new political spaces as key sites of influence in terms of local policy making, we were equally concerned to explore how, or indeed – if - these spaces were also viewed by voluntary activists as important arenas through to target their efforts to effect social change. In Manchester, we found that voluntary activism is being played out through these spaces, in quite subtle, nuanced but deliberate ways:

UKIE2 Yeah I mean, I've got a few things that I think 'that's what we're working towards' - and we might need to lose a few battles in order to get there you

know, in order to convince people... it's like the stuff about commissioning that's going on at the moment, like my end goal is to actually get local people involved in budgeting and commissioning and all of that process, but you've got to go through all the resistance that statutory people feel about letting go of control and devolving power and all that stuff. So if you hit them now with the idea of participatory budgeting and all that they'll just go 'woah', but if you sort of creep the idea in, then potentially you could get somewhere in the end. It's just, it's a kind of softly, softly activism I suppose.

UKIE1 *It's also more about being a kind of marathon runner rather than a sprinter isn't it?*

Of course organisations also commented on the lack of equity in the power they are able to exert within these partnerships. Both local statutory and voluntary sector representatives frequently referred to representation on these bodies in terms of 'ticking the boxes', noting that the real power and influence is wielded through more informal relationships developed outside formal partnership structures. This phenomena has been recognised by national government in the UK. The recently released Treasury Report (June, 2007) specifically notes that the third sector feels it is not always listened to by the state – with particular frustration being expressed in relation to decision-making bodies.

In New Zealand, despite having similar welfare structures and a state that can also be characterised as post neo-liberal in its agenda, there is no real evidence of a shift towards the sorts of governance structures we have seen emerging in the UK. Indeed, state-voluntary working in New Zealand is characterised more by the kinds of informal networks and contacts that organisations in the UK indicate are more powerful sites of influence than the more formalised governance structures. This level of informality in the New Zealand context is seen to be part of their national culture – a 'kiwi way of being'. There is also less separation between sub-sectors of the voluntary sector and more mobility between them. As a consequence there is substantial cross-over between organisations, and what has been described as a 'village New Zealand' mentality that facilitates greater accessibility to key figures within the statutory sector at national level than we see in England (though interestingly similar claims were made about accessibility to the State following devolution in Scotland).

Asked whether they felt the UK governance structured would be effective in the New Zealand context, one respondent commented:

NZ ABI 09: The UK model is based around peak agencies ...and I think that peak agency theory works to a certain degree in that it allows you to manage a whole lot of sectors. The problem with New Zealand is that we haven't got to that point. We are a series of interest groups that make up an economy and making a peak agency type theory just doesn't work...I'm not actually sure that going down that track is helpful for the actual sector itself. I mean it's helpful for those in the power positions – but its a small number of people that would fit around that table – so how do the rest get there?

Though the form and nature of partnership structures in New Zealand differ from those in the UK, shifts in how voluntary activism is being operationalised over time were expressed in similar ways:

NZAM: *It [my activism] has [changed]. It's probably a fairly inevitable process that happens to many people as they age (laughs) that my activism has focussed much more now on leveraging at a strategic level..... I've got much more strategic about how to have a voice, what will have an influence, what will make a difference at a political level. I've notched up my activism.*

2) Voluntary activism and 'voice'

We now want to turn briefly, to the issue of 'voice' – an important aspect of voluntary activism - and one recognised in the UK Treasury's recently released report (June 2007), noting:

"the third sector is clear that it regards campaigning, empowerment, advocacy and challenge as its core activities, and key to its ability to play a role in shaping economic and social regeneration. The report makes explicit the Government's wish to ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to campaign and be heard" (3.1,15).

Yet a key dilemma for service provider organisations has been the need to balance the securing of funding through service delivery against the tensions of maintaining the ability to actively lobby for social change to better the lives of the, often marginalised, citizens that they represent. The view from the Treasury is clearly one that seeks to encourage organisations to continue to undertake these dual roles, but recognises that at local level this is not always easily resolved:

*R: What we want to do in our review is make it very clear that the Government thinks that it's **fine** for organisations to campaign and receive funding. Because I think at the Local Authority level there's often some kind of, 'well if your going to criticise us, we're not going to engage with you'. And that's just a bit childish really and that shouldn't really be the case, because big organisations **do** engage with government the big ones that engage with DFES and DFID, they will say, 'well **we** can campaign and complain and be a thorn in the side of government but we don't find that stops us at all from being engaged with the contracts'. So maybe it's something to do with size and the relationship being more equal and more grown up. I think that sometimes at the local level it's because the relationship is not equal that people don't feel that they do both the contracting and the campaigning.*

Similar dilemmas are evident in New Zealand, where voluntary organisations face similar conflicts to those of their UK counterparts. For New Zealand based organisations the issue remains problematic as the main funding available for campaigning is that raised through fundraising or from a limited number of trusts that exist in New Zealand. The sources of such Trusts, however, are seen to be problematic as many are set up by organisations whose activities run counter to the ethos of the voluntary sector – for example gambling organisations etc.

The UK Treasury has outlined proposals for a small grants scheme for local grassroots organisations to enable them to ‘give voice’. With funding limited to a maximum of £5,000, though a welcome start, the level of impact is likely to be limited.

Concluding comments

Inevitably in such a brief discussion we can touch on only a few of the key differences and similarities that have emerged in this study. In terms of the UK/New Zealand comparison, the differences we are seeing may simply be a case of the UK being ‘further down the line’ in the development of state/voluntary sector relationships. Respondents from New Zealand, however, also point to the country’s general distrust of structures, reflecting the view that the more formal UK partnership model would not work in New Zealand due to the lack of peak agencies and, generally, a greater blurring of the boundaries of scope across voluntary organisations operating in New Zealand. It seems clear that even in countries with similar political and welfare contexts ‘one size’ does not fit all. It is critical that we understand not only the socio-political influences but also the spatial context within which developments around partnership and voluntary activism are emerging and developing.

Though we are still in the early stages of our analysis, there is also early evidence that this may vary across sub-sectors. Any attempt to understand how voluntary activism is being played out in relation to new governance structures, thus, needs to be sensitive to these complexities.

References

Markham and Bonjean (1995) Community Orientations of Higher Status Women Volunteers, *Social Forces*, 73:4, 1553-1562

Wilson, J. (2000) ‘Volunteering’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 2, 215-240.

HM Treasury (2007) *Consultation Feedback of the future of the third sector in social and economic regeneration*, Crown Pubs, London.