

## **How do Community Agendas for research differ from Government Agendas?**

*Mike Quiggin*

### **What do we mean by community?**

'Community' is a buzz word again - bringing back memories of the 1970s when the left learned from the women's movement the importance of struggles outside the workplace and turned to community action. But this time the word is being favourably used in government circles; the government says it aims to empower communities.

As social commentators pointed out in the 1970s 'community' is a vague term - it can mean everything and nothing. Usually when government, social theorists or community activists use the term, particularly when the intention is to consult or involve the community, reference is being made to organised groups rather than to a collection of households. However, this still leaves us with a huge variety of types of community group.

This variety is reflected in the many different terms used to describe them including: active citizens' groups, activists' groups, groups within civil society, voluntary sector groups, 'not-for-profit groups', non-governmental organisations, third sector groups, charities, campaign group and social movement groups. My preference is for 'not-for-profit sector' to distinguish organised activity in the community from the private sector on the one hand and the statutory sector on the other.

The variety of names reflects a vast range of different types of groups in the sector. Some are large employers with little or no voluntary input whilst some depend entirely on volunteer activists. Some have extremely radical aims whilst others have no political interests at all. The sector includes self-help groups, service providers, religious groups, trade unions, political parties, single issue campaign groups, infrastructural support groups and common interest groups, for example, sports clubs and hobbyists. Many people would argue that this is such a diverse collection of organisations that it makes little sense to identify it as a 'sector'.

In any case, you would expect that such a wide variety of types of groups would have many different research needs.

### **What do we know about the research agenda for the 'not-for-profit sector'?**

I'm not aware of any significant study of the research needs of the 'not-for-profit sector'. However, there have been studies of this sector's information needs, which I would argue is a stab at the same territory.

David Deacon and Peter Golding (from the University of Lancaster Centre for Mass Communications Research) undertook one notable study in 1988. They surveyed a sample of groups on the mailing lists of Councils for Voluntary Services (the usual form of infrastructural group) and local authorities in the West Midlands. They found that groups needed primarily practical information or signposting information (see Table 1). In particular, information on sources of funding, the existence and activities of other groups and the provision of training was required. 'Not-for-profit groups' need know-how information (e.g. how to get

funding) or know-where information (e.g. where to find other 'not-for-profit groups' or their local councillor) more than they need issues information or research information (know-what information or know-why information).

### **1: The importance of different types of information to voluntary groups.**

- Information About Rating Funding 4.49
- Other voluntary and community groups 3.84
- Training 3.68
- Local government 3.45
- The media 3.40
- Managing staff and resources 3.37
- Research 3.29
- Central government 3.27
- Public library services 3.02
- Video technology 2.71
- Computer technology 2.61

Note: Mean rating of importance on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being 'very important' and 1 being 'totally unimportant'. Source: Deacon and Golding (1988)

However, 'information' just like 'community' is a slippery term.

Unfortunately, **community information** inherits the vagaries of its two component words. As one speaker remarked "if there is any more vaguer word than information it is community" (Alan Bunch, radical commentator on library and information issues, in his book *Community Information Services, 1982*)

Just how did the groups surveyed interpret 'information about local government'? Did they see this as signposting information (when does the Council next meet), rights information (how does someone apply for Council Tax benefit) or issues information (what is the Council's policy on community care)?

Further insight into the research needs of 'not-for-profit groups' comes from our experience at Bradford Resource Centre (BRC). BRC describes itself as providing '*Resources for Democracy*'. We provide resources for community action - resources (reprographic and communications technology, access to information) that are beyond the personal reach of most community activists usually because of cost. With technological change and lower prices the horizon of what is beyond people's pockets, yet affordable within BRC's budgets, changes. We're celebrating our 21st anniversary - over the years we were the first in the city to introduce the following for use by 'not-for-profit groups': magnification/reduction photocopying, word-processing, desk-top publishing, CD-ROM information sources, scanning, colour ink-jet printing and access to the Internet.

I'm the librarian so you'd expect me to emphasise the use of information sources and helping improve skills in the use of these - but our experience has been that cheap word-processing and printing or copying is

more popular. Doing or using research is a low priority for most of the 'not-for-profit sector'. They are more concerned with promotion, recruitment, mutual support, direct campaign activities or raising funds.

Nonetheless we do have a well-used information system. We can confirm Deacon and Golding's (1998) findings that practical or signposting information is more heavily used than issues information. The types of issues or rights information that 'not-for-profit groups' most use are as follows:

- government policy and its rationale - and the counter-arguments developed by oppositional groups;
- the intentions of private sector organisations and the arguments that may impel government to regulate many of these intended actions;
- legal information;
- self-help information (often health); and
- achievements and strategies of other 'not-for-profit groups'.

### **What is the government agenda?**

All too often the government's research agenda is embedded in those promises that they made during the election (I am thinking particularly of the five pledges New Labour printed on those little credit cards). Delivering on these sound-bite commitments - reducing class sizes and waiting lists for example - is important. Much research effort is directed at proving that these targets are being hit. So, a major priority is research towards proving that waiting lists have been reduced rather than, say, research into the extent of health gains that might be achieved by a variety of alternative health strategies. Government thinking has been hijacked by management science because this is thought to guarantee value for money and thus convince 'Middle England' that public expenditure is being undertaken in a responsible manner. (Similarly, much research is influenced by the thinking of marketing science - for example work with focus groups to see how best to present arguments over NHS spending to the public).

A similar approach can be seen in regeneration projects and work towards overcoming social exclusion. As observed previously, community development is back in fashion - or rather 'capacity building' is in fashion. 'Capacity building' aims to increase the ability of communities to fulfil their aims but it's also about increasing their ability to work in partnership with others (mainly state agencies) in pursuing strategies in line with government policy - partly because that will bring new state money into the locality.

There are two ways in which this might become a trap for 'not-for-profit groups'. Firstly is it an effective use of scarce resources (volunteer time) at the disposal of a small 'not-for-profit group' to formalise their activities. For example, managing staff and budgets and monitoring your activity in such a way as to be sure to prove that you've hit agreed performance measures - that all important management science in action again? Secondly, many groups would question New Labour's belief that there is no significant contradiction between fulfilling their own aims and working in partnership to carry out government policy i.e. that there is no real difference between a community agenda and the government agenda.

Many 'not-for-profit groups' have no interest in legitimating government's electoral promises. Some may have oppositional interests (stopping developments), others may have constructive interests (improving services or infrastructures) that don't fit government priorities. As for marketing spin - I'd argue that 'not-

for-profit groups' will have their own spin to impose on research - but then I'd argue that science is not neutral.

### **What is to be done?**

Despite the low priority for research and information work expressed by 'not-for-profit groups' we should encourage or even provoke extra activity because it is important that 'not-for-profit groups' have access to library and information skills and research skills; are in a position to originate their own data; are able to critique other data-sets and conclusions made from them; and are better able to engage in debate about current circumstances (e.g. descriptions of exclusion) and what should happen (e.g. regeneration strategies).

So, what can we do to help make this happen? Firstly, many activists only seem to have the space for research when they are students (e.g. their course requires it) or when their job requires it (e.g. as journalists). Therefore we should try to ensure that such activists are motivated to undertake research that is rooted in communities and focuses on community agendas. Secondly, we should find funding to pay people to do community based research. Thirdly, we should run exciting training courses in 'doing research and using information' (plug in to 'trainingitis' - the obsession with undergoing training displayed by white-collar workers everywhere - including the 'not-for-profit sector'). Then we might start to have the basis for a flowering of barefoot statistician/research/information work.

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