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research

Small-scale civil society and social policy: the importance of experiential learning, insider knowledge and diverse motivations in shaping community action

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Interest in the formal voluntary sector and wider civil society organisations (CSOs) has grown in recent years and now CSOs are viewed as key to delivering government policy agendas of social action, open public services and localism. This article uses data from 29 interviews with community activists, policy makers and voluntary sector experts to explore the role, function and workings of small-scale civil society organisations (SCSOs). It finds that small-scale activity often emerges as an emotional response to local need, shared interest or the desire for social interaction rather than in response to policy initiatives. SCSOs call on a wide range of resources garnered within their community of geography or of interest. They thrive in unregulated environments providing flexible and holistic services for people in need. The article argues that the co-option of such activities into the delivery of political agendas is unlikely to achieve policy goals.

key words civil society • policy • services • motivations • community

Introduction

Interest in the role, function and efficacy of the voluntary sector and wider civil society organisations (CSOs) has grown in recent years and spans the developed world. Civil society is often seen as having the potential to meet a wide range of social, policy and economic goals (Harris and Rochester, 2001; HM Treasury, 2002; Toepler, 2003). Substantial knowledge has accumulated about aspects of formal voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations (Kendall, 2003). The development of the mixed economy of welfare offered a role for CSOs in many social policy areas (Home Office, 2005; Powell, 2007). With the onset of global recession, and introduction of austerity measures, further potential roles have been outlined for CSOs; for example, taking on the management of local assets and public services. In the United States, CSOs are often seen as a grassroots solution to the failure of government and the market (Toepler, 2003), while in the United Kingdom (UK), the development of the 'Big Society' and, subsequently, ideologies of social action, open public services and localism has further raised the profile of CSOs and their assumed, if contested,

1 potential to both meet diverse needs and address democratic deficit (Cabinet Office,
2 2010a, 2010b; Coote, 2010; Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012).

3 This continuing policy interest in the role of VCS organisations raises questions
4 about their capacity or willingness to respond to those expectations (Harris and
5 Young, 2010), **[[please supply reference]]** which have yet to be investigated
6 empirically. There is an existing body of knowledge that focuses on formal CSOs,
7 largely consisting of registered charities and other regulated bodies such as community
8 interest companies. Yet small, informal CSOs (SCSOs), as unincorporated associations,
9 are argued to represent the largest part of civil society (Kane et al, 2013). Despite
10 assumptions made that such CSOs have the potential to address a wide range of
11 policy concerns (see Phillimore and McCabe, 2009), there has been little research in
12 this field. Indeed, where such work has been undertaken, it has tended to be with
13 small, if vulnerable, community-based organisations with paid staff – and often,
14 historically, funded through area-based initiatives such as the Urban Programme and
15 the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, rather than on **[[Change ‘on’ to ‘through’?**
16 **May need rewording slightly]]** informal (ie, unregulated) community activism
17 (Milbourne, 2013). Policy assumptions about the role of SCSOs therefore lack a
18 systematic evidence base.

19 This article examines the capacity and willingness of SCSOs to respond to
20 developing policy agendas using the perspectives of intermediaries working closely
21 with SCSOs and brings new knowledge about the nature of SCSOs in the UK and
22 how they form, learn, work and develop. It contends that SCSOs offer a wide range
23 of distinctive activities tailored to the needs of different individuals and groups. The
24 article concludes that there is some potential for SCSOs to address policy concerns
25 and, in particular, provide an outlet for social action. However, such activities are
26 distributed unevenly because of unequal access to resources (Clifford et al, 2013) and
27 their dependence on organic social action emerging from the personal motivations
28 of volunteers and activists rather than any ‘top-down’ agenda.

30 **Small-scale civil society organisations**

31
32 Interest in SCSOs cuts across all political parties and wide-ranging policy concerns
33 (McCabe and Phillimore, 2010). Under New Labour administrations this coincided
34 with investments in small organisations to develop their capacity to address specific
35 policy concerns such as building social capital, increasing community cohesion and
36 supporting neighbourhood regeneration (Taylor, 2012). There are just over 200,000
37 CSOs known to regulatory bodies in the UK (NCVO, 2009 **[[please supply**
38 **reference]]**; Kane et al, 2013). Defining what is meant by SCSOs is not straightforward
39 and is discussed in some depth in Phillimore and McCabe (2009). Herein, SCSOs
40 are defined as unregistered CSOs. It is difficult to make definitive claims about the
41 number of SCSOs in the UK (Phillimore and McCabe, 2009). MacGillivray et al
42 (2001), the New Economics Foundation (cited in NCVO, 2009) and the National
43 Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO, 2009) estimate that there around
44 900,000 SCSOs. While data about the extent of activity are tentative, it is clear that
45 SCSOs significantly outnumber formal CSOs.

46 Knowledge about SCSOs is underdeveloped and there is a clear lack of empirical
47 evidence, with Toepler (2003: 236) arguing that this knowledge deficit is ‘perhaps one
48 of the few remaining big mysteries’ in civil society research. Indeed, the Community

1 Sector Coalition (undated) has argued that, in terms of both academic and policy
 2 understandings, community activism (rather than formalised community-based
 3 organisations) has been and remains *Unseen, unequal, untapped...*

4 In the last decade there has been a growing body of literature on the problems and
 5 challenges faced by smaller, community-based, formalised organisations (Rochester,
 6 2000). **[[missing reference ~ or did you mean to cite 2013?]]** These include
 7 problems associated with low levels of funding, expertise, sustainability and a lack of
 8 policy influence (Holland and Ritvo, 2008; Thompson, 2008). Under New Labour
 9 in the UK there was a plethora of policy statements and initiatives to address these
 10 perceived deficits:

- 11
- 12 • from *An action plan for community empowerment: Building on success* (CLG, 2007a)
- 13 through to *Communities in control* (CLG, 2008);
- 14 • from the development of community empowerment networks to specific (formal,
- 15 voluntary-sector-focused) ‘capacity-building’ programmes such as ChangeUp.
- 16

17 Ironically, there is very limited evidence that such investment in support and
 18 infrastructure stimulated new levels of community activism (NAO, 2009). **[[please
 19 supply reference]]** Equally, assertions that the ‘big state’ has crowded out community
 20 action seem unfounded judging by both international and national data (Hackl et
 21 al, 2009; Bartels et al, 2011). Thus, there is evidence of a disconnect between policy
 22 statements and the realities ‘on the ground’.

23 Following the 2010 General Election and the emergence of the coalition
 24 government, there was a renewed, if somewhat re-focused, policy interest in SCSOs.
 25 Under the Big Society agenda, such groups would be instrumental in ‘rolling back
 26 the state’, playing a greater role in the mixed economy of welfare and rebalancing
 27 the relationship between the state and people (Chanan and Miller, 2010). At the same
 28 time, much of the national and regional infrastructure aimed at supporting community
 29 action and present sectoral voice, **[[unclear ~ please reword as necessary]]** through
 30 strategic partnership arrangements with government, has been removed.

31 Subsequently, community organisations have been seen as key actors in addressing
 32 (or mitigating) the impact of austerity measures, developing open public services,
 33 managing public assets and, within the terms of the Localism Act 2011, returning
 34 power to communities (McClellan and Dellott, 2011). More recently, community
 35 organisations, and the social capital they are assumed to engender, have been viewed
 36 as a mechanism for health promotion at a grassroots level – the assumption being
 37 that increasing community activity will reduce demand for acute health and social
 38 welfare interventions, resulting in savings to the public purse (DH, 2012; Fox, 2013).
 39 **[[please supply Fox reference]]**

40 These moves have been underpinned by a belief that SCSOs have the potential to
 41 use local knowledge to deliver services more effectively within their own communities.
 42 *Communities and Local Government* (CLG, 2007b: 1) argues that SCSOs ‘help
 43 deliver social capital, social cohesion and democratic participation. Better public
 44 investment in the sector will result in a better quality of life for local people and
 45 local communities, partly through their own direct activities and partly through their
 46 interaction with public services.’

47 The idea that SCSOs might offer an outlet for action that provides both a voice
 48 for communities and responsive services has also come to the fore (Wuthnow, 2004;

1 OCS, 2010). Building on the ideas of Freire (1970) and Alinsky (1971), it has been
2 argued that through working within SCSOs, communities can be equipped with skills,
3 knowledge, power and control to enable them to address the perceived democratic
4 deficit, improve quality of life and have services able to meet local need more effectively
5 than those organised by local policy makers. Such an approach has become part of
6 government policy, with key actors making grand statements claiming that there is
7 no limit to voluntary and community sector capacity to transform deprived areas
8 (CLG, 2010).

9 This period of rapid change for the voluntary sector as a whole has been examined
10 in both the academic and practice literature. At a macro level, Mohan (2012) argues
11 that the concept of the 'Big Society' is predicated on an assumption that there is an
12 unlimited pool of volunteers in communities and society at large: an assumption not
13 supported empirically. Others (Richardson, 2012a, 2012b) suggest that there is an
14 expandable pool of voluntary labour. At a more practice-based level there has been
15 substantial research into the impact on VCOs of austerity measures in terms of practice
16 and values and their responses to these measures (Milbourne, 2013; Rochester, 2013).
17 However, as noted, the majority of that literature has focused on impact in terms of
18 the funded and formalised voluntary sector or specific types of SCSOs, for example
19 refugee groups and faith-based organisations (Kent, 2011; ROTA, 2011; Davidson
20 and Packman, 2012).

21 There are further shortcomings within research in the field. Studies of the role,
22 impact and function of SCSOs are often undertaken by local actors and findings
23 rarely enter the public domain. In the absence of robust empirical evidence, views
24 about SCSO activity depend on the theoretical or political outlook. Some argue that
25 SCSOs make a marginal contribution to service provision (Toepler, 2003), instead
26 driven by ideology or the need for solidarity (Barnes et al, 2006). Others contend
27 that SCSOs provide valuable services and innovative approaches to reach marginalised
28 groups (Boateng, 2002). Still others argue that, while community groups may play
29 an important role in addressing the impact of welfare reform, they lack the resources
30 and capacity to effectively respond to rising levels of need (Newcastle CVS, 2012).
31 Such evidence as there is about the limitations of SCSO action have not deterred
32 policy makers from encouraging SCSOs to increase their role in delivering across
33 policy agendas.

34 If anything, this burden of policy expectation on small-scale community groups has
35 increased since the 2010 General Election. These groups were already expected to build
36 community cohesion and combat violent extremism (Cooper, 2008) but now, as the
37 thresholds for accessing health and social care are raised, they are additionally expected
38 to contribute to both individual and whole population health and wellbeing (GCPH,
39 2012; DH, 2013). With the move towards localism, away from centralised approaches
40 to addressing social problems and the extension of community rights – to challenge,
41 manage and buy – it is more important than ever to explore the capacity of SCSOs
42 to meet need and the mechanisms by which SCSOs could be encouraged to act.

43 This is particularly the case when criticisms of the direction of government policy
44 towards SCOs in general, and SCSOs in particular, is taken into account. The interest
45 in localism, in extending community rights under the Localism Act 2011, is said to
46 be a smoke screen for cuts to services (Coote, 2010; Ishkanian and Szeter, 2012) and
47 funding regimes are 'reshaping' parts of the sector – away from advocacy and into
48 service delivery (Aitken, 2014: 28). The timescales for communities to exercise their

1 right to challenge, manage, buy and engage in asset transfer are unrealistic (Derounian,
2 2014). Further, it is argued, these 'extended' community rights will increase inequalities.
3 CSOs in wealthier communities have the resources to respond in ways that poorer
4 communities may not (Taylor, 2012). Finally, critics of governmental policy towards
5 SCSOs (under both New Labour and the coalition government) point out that
6 concepts of community and civil society are only invoked when they conform to the
7 dominant political discourse and are dismissed when critical of policy (Shaw, 2007), as
8 in the case of current controversies around the growth of food banks across the UK.

10 **Methods**

11
12 In response to the gaps in knowledge about SCSOs, we sought to undertake semi-
13 structured interviews with the aim of exploring the nature, role and function of
14 SCSOs, and claims of distinctiveness in relation to formal (ie, registered) CSOs, and
15 consider their capacity to respond to emerging policy agendas. In order to identify
16 interviewees, the research team of five people drafted a list of organisations and
17 individuals known to be active in the field. Our focus was on respondents who
18 supported or researched SCSOs and who had themselves played a role in running
19 SCSOs in addition to operating in their current, more strategic role. This meant that
20 we were able to simultaneously access an overview of experiences in the field in which
21 they were operating as well as specific experiences from their own individual interests.
22 Given that SCSOs are incredibly diverse in terms of structure, organisation, activities
23 undertaken and communities served, we adopted a maximum variation sampling
24 approach (Patton, 2001), including individuals with wide-ranging experiences
25 covering different types of SCSOs and serving different kinds of communities. We
26 placed a particular emphasis on the types of organisations often excluded from research
27 on civil society, which has tended to focus on professionalised, white middle-class
28 run organisations engaged in contracting and the delivery of public services (Benson,
29 2014). This purposive sampling suits diverse small sample sizes with limited population
30 information and enables the drawing of tentative generalisations on the basis that if
31 themes repeatedly emerge across different respondents they are likely to be indicative
32 of key commonalities (Patton, 2001).

33 Each individual was approached via telephone or email and a follow-up telephone
34 call in which we explained in more detail that we were seeking to undertake interviews
35 exploring the role and function of SCSOs. All but three interviews were undertaken
36 face to face. A degree of snowball sampling was undertaken whereby respondents were
37 asked to recommend others for interview. Informed consent was achieved through
38 discussing the nature and purpose of the project, opportunities to ask questions and
39 the researcher and respondent signing a contract agreeing participation, data handling
40 and presentation criteria, or where interviews were conducted over the telephone,
41 verbal assent was recorded. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. The
42 key themes emerging were discussed by the team and a systematic thematic analysis
43 approach was adopted in order to analyse the data (Guest, 2012).

44 In total, 29 individuals were interviewed from 27 different organisations covering
45 England and Wales. Details of interviewees and their organisations are set out in Table
46 1. The organisations we interviewed represented a broad spectrum of SCSO activity
47 but were not completely comprehensive. For example, the project was unable to set up
48 interviews with grant-making trusts funding small groups or community organisers.

1 Clearly, all respondents have some kind of belief set that shaped the nature of the
2 responses they gave to questions. Interviewing individuals who ‘represent’ some part
3 of the SCSO sector or have specialist knowledge in the area comes with a range of
4 limitations as well as strengths. The respondents, used to advocating in their field, may
5 adopt a particular political position, which generalises their experiences of SCSOs. It
6 is possible that they omitted experiences that did not support their overall narrative.
7 By asking for illustrative examples of situations described and enabling respondents
8 to use their own experiences of volunteering for SCSOs, we tried to question
9 their positioning(s) where possible. Our focus on intermediary sources gave us an
10 opportunity to explore their perceptions regarding the discursive incorporation or
11 resistance to incorporation of SCSOs into the governable terrain of policy (Carmel
12 and Harlock, 2008) and thus provides insights into their availability to policy. However,
13 it means that we do not present the minutiae of everyday functioning, which is likely
14 to offer a messier account of contradictions and commonalities than the one we offer.

15 Interviews took between 45 minutes and two hours and included questions such
16 as: What kind of function(s) do these types of organisations/activities fulfil? What
17 are the main challenges or barriers facing SCSOs and ‘below-the-radar’ community
18 activities? The data represent a set of actors’ views and perceptions that may be
19 confirmed, questioned or even challenged. Indeed, the views expressed were largely
20 positive, portraying SCSOs as inclusive, responsive and flexible. A narrative that
21 recognises that such groups can also be rigid and exclusive, as Pathak and McGhee
22 (2015) argue, was largely absent.

23 **Role, function and motivation of SCSOs**

24 Most respondents saw SCSOs as a community response to meeting needs that were
25 currently unmet due either to lack of resources or the failure of policy makers
26 to identify and address need. This was particularly the case for organisations that
27 supported minority **[[ethnic?]]** communities who were not connected to mainstream
28 organisations and often experienced highly complex problems, which we were
29 told were outside the scope, attention and focus of established CSOs (Craig, 2011).
30 SCSOs were said to impact at a highly localised level in wide-ranging ways through
31 providing for individual welfare needs such as immediate provision of clothing or food.
32 Considerable emphasis was placed on actively reaching out to isolated individuals or
33 organising activities such as reading groups, which provided a connection between
34 strangers.

35 Action was said to be most likely to occur where there were no alternatives “when
36 you have no money, no food or you just have to do something” (women’s organisation
37 respondent). Rural respondents commented that community groups were increasingly
38 “filling the gaps left when statutory services withdraw from [rural] areas”. A common
39 problem, whether that was desperation or poverty, was seen as a powerful motivator
40 for activity. Shared anger was sometimes a motivator for action. Some SCSO activity
41 had a social function: “people are group animals and naturally want to come together”
42 (rural respondent). People also combined efforts where there was a common interest.
43 Migrant and refugee community organisation (MRCO) respondents talked about
44 actions occurring to provide mutual aid to new arrivals, unable to locate support
45 elsewhere because they did not have knowledge of the civil society landscape and
46 larger voluntary and statutory organisations lacked the reach, knowledge or language
47
48

Table 1: Background and expertise of the interviewees

Expertise of interviewees	Scope of organisation	Geographical scope	Number of interviewees
Migrant and refugee communities	Supporting development of migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs)	London	5
	Encouraging partnerships (action-based charity)	National	
	Providing support to MRCOs	England	
Rural communities	Projects promoting the development of refugee communities	National	
	Supporting rural communities to improve access to services	National	5
	Supporting rural community groups and parish councils	England	
Development agency	Linking rural groups and government	National	
	Providing advice, training and advocacy	Regional	4
	Advancing and promoting community development practice	National	
Generic umbrella/membership organisations	Championing small asset-owning community-based organisations	National	
	Coordinating community sector voice	England	
	Connecting local community development agencies (network)	National	4
	Providing a community voice around regeneration and renewal	National	
Black and minority ethnic (BME) focus	Helping communities to control local assets	National	
	Connecting community groups with local authorities	National	
	Championing the voice of BME SCSSOs	National	4
	Academic/practitioner specialising in BME civil society	International	
Policy makers	Seeking to lead change (think tank)	National	
	Government department SCSSOs	England and Wales	3
Faith	Government department focusing on regeneration and renewal		
	Community action (multi-faith network)	National	2
Arts	Academic/practitioner with expertise in faith-based organisations	National	
	Representing amateur and grassroots arts groups and organisations	England and Wales	1
Women	Representing women's groups	National	1
Total			29

1 **[[Change ‘Scope of organisation’ to ‘Remit of organisation’ to avoid**
 2 **repetition of ‘scope’ in the next column?]]**

3 **[[In the policy makers row, ‘Government department SCSOs’ ~ sense**
 4 **unclear ~ please reword as necessary]]**

5 **[[Please provide clarification as to why e.g. there are 5 interviewees**
 6 **under migrant and refugee communities and yet only 4 items under**
 7 **‘scope of organisation’ and ‘geographical scope’ in that row. Or is the table**
 8 **incomplete? The same query applies to the following rows: Rural, BME**
 9 **and Policy makers]]**

10
 11
 12 skills to understand their needs (McCabe et al, 2013). There was sometimes a cultural
 13 expectation that support should be provided to “friends I didn’t know you have to
 14 open your door to those in need” (MRCO respondent). Respondents reported that
 15 political, social, cultural or faith values could drive action. Actors frequently believed
 16 that they were doing the right thing, for example raising money to send an unwell
 17 migrant back home. Others may argue that such approaches are unregulated and
 18 emerge from individual belief systems that do not consider alternative courses of action.

19 Occasionally, actions were initiated after people had seen organisations establish
 20 elsewhere and were inspired to follow suit. Faith and MRCO respondents talked
 21 about a “crucible” for action. This could be a location within an area that has a history
 22 of social action, which is accepting of risk taking, or might be in the early stages of
 23 diversification. Here new arrivals were said to create life and energy, reproducing
 24 vibrancy from their home communities and more focused on self-help and providing a
 25 stimulus for others to become active: “we may as well do it too” (MRCO respondent).

26 27 **Distinctiveness**

28
 29 Policy respondents argued that the sector was “vital” and “crucial” because of its
 30 wide reach, responsiveness to emerging problems, flexibility and innovative nature.
 31 SCSO activities were seen as distinctive from those of formal civil society because
 32 they used experiential knowledge, and were led by and for communities. Because
 33 those initiating activity understood and had sometimes themselves lived through
 34 similar problems, they were trusted and could address the most sensitive of issues, for
 35 example sexual violence or institutional racism – concerns we were told were not
 36 necessarily recognised by the formal sector. Such insider knowledge gave SCSOs
 37 enhanced potential to meet the needs of vulnerable communities.

38 SCSO action was embedded in communities they were connected to, meaning
 39 they could reach people through localised working. The capacity to understand and
 40 holistically address complex needs was illustrated by the example of local women’s
 41 organisations that offered local women escaping domestic violence shelter in their
 42 own homes, providing them with clothing and food and rapid one-to-one support
 43 to access benefits and housing. SCSOs apparently worked in a different way from
 44 mainstream CSOs or the state because they operated on instinct – responding to a
 45 ‘gut reaction’. **[[the following sentence is a little unclear and doesn’t connect**
 46 **too well with the previous one ~ possible to rephrase things a little?]]** This
 47 illustrated by refugee community groups, where challenging a deportation decision
 48 was seen as unjust, or in rural communities where the withdrawal of local services

1 threatened communities' quality of life. A rural respondent argued that SCSOs "create
2 genuine personal connections on a level that is appropriate – person-to-person
3 connection that big agencies just cannot do". These dimensions of responsiveness 'on
4 a human scale' were seen as key strengths but interviewees also recognised a potential
5 weakness as groups often lacked resources to respond effectively to growing levels of
6 need (Pathak and McGhee, 2015).

7 The lack of formal service delivery contracts was said to free SCSOs to resolve
8 problems in innovative ways. Without formality they were uninhibited by bureaucracy,
9 able to act immediately without sanction and thus were said to be more fluid, flexible
10 and informal than constituted organisations. Their ability to target activity exactly
11 where required, and quickly "be fleet-of-foot and more responsive" (rural respondent),
12 meant that SCSOs were better at meeting need, in "hard-to-reach" situations than
13 the state and formal CSOs (MRCO respondent). Dependence on just one or two
14 leaders **[[please clarify here whether you are talking about SCSOs or formal
15 CSOs]]** to decide which person, or which problem, justified their attention risked
16 decision making about 'deservingness' being arbitrary or even politically driven.
17 Further research is needed to examine how such decisions are made.

18 The ability to operate without regard to "the rules" (development agency respondent)
19 and thus be flexible and challenge the status quo was argued to be important and
20 could enable organisations to be radical. Faith and umbrella respondents stressed the
21 importance of "just being able to get on with it". Without contracts, SCSO activists
22 were said to take risks and were free to lobby and to criticise. As an example, when
23 local people in a village heard that their village would not receive funds for flood
24 defences despite repeated flooding, a local woman formed an action group, using
25 posters to attract support and then fundraising and lobbying the Environment Agency
26 for a change in decision. They questioned the basis on which previous decisions were
27 made, persisting until successful. They then turned their attention to fighting the
28 large-scale housing development imposed on their village in the local plan.

29 Some respondents described the reluctance of SCSOs to work with policy makers.
30 For example, an MRCO respondent argued that working with policy makers "could
31 force a change in values and priorities". SCSOs only being accountable to their own
32 members enhanced freedom, motivation and effectiveness because they were not
33 beholden to policy agendas or externally imposed targets. However, SCSOs may
34 not necessarily be democratically run or open-minded. While some were organised
35 collectively, others may be **[[change 'may be' to 'were'?]]** controlled by autocratic
36 individuals. They could be inward looking, insular and exclusive and sometimes sought
37 to be 'under the radar' to avoid scrutiny.

38 Despite their enthusiastic and positive attitudes about the work of SCSOs,
39 respondents also understood their limitations. There was no guarantee that passionate,
40 motivated individuals would do a good job, or that successful activists could become
41 effective managers. Furthermore, faith and black and minority ethnic (BME)
42 respondents agreed that where action occurred was often a "postcode lottery", and
43 may not correspond with need, reflecting some of the concerns expressed in wider
44 discussions around the notion of charity deserts. Further, respondents argued the
45 wide-scale need could only be solved through larger-scale, more strategic investment.
46 Volunteers or support workers were often untrained and inexperienced and could
47 give bad advice or make poor decisions. Power struggles between activists could lead
48

1 to organisational failure. SCSOs running children's activities were seen as particularly
2 problematic because they may lack training in safeguarding.

3 4 **Resources for SCSO action**

5
6 SCSO activity harnessed a wide range of resources, with time and expertise particularly
7 important. Volunteering was fundamental to SCSOs, but was unstructured activity,
8 with boundaries between the personal and civic lives of actors somewhat blurred: "it's
9 completely their life ... they never clock off" (development agency respondent). There
10 were no set hours, structure or allocated roles. Volunteers acted when needed, often
11 using their own resources. For example, a neighbourhood organisation relied entirely
12 on donations of time, money, space and expertise from local businesses and residents
13 to collect funds to improve local facilities. MRCO respondents talked of sharing their
14 lives with people in, or on the verge of, destitution, if they came knocking at their
15 door, who they had never met before. Some groups accessed resources from within
16 their communities to pay for actions outside the remit of formal organisations. For
17 example, a Sudanese community donated money to a Sudanese SCSO to pay for a
18 destitute community member to return to the Sudan, while a Pakistani SCSO raised
19 £20,000 from within their own community to build a school in Pakistan. Others
20 gave examples of donations brought to events such as food and musical talents. Many
21 groups depended on some kind of cost-free social space, often in schools or churches,
22 to run their activities or opened their homes for meetings. People used networking
23 skills and persuasion to recruit volunteers with the knowledge or resources they
24 needed and could not afford to purchase.

25 Lack of money, a challenge commonly identified in the literature (Kendall, 2003;
26 Thompson, 2008), was compounded by a lack of premises, or information technology
27 skills, which hindered many groups from meeting their community's requirements.
28 Most were said to be unable to address the scale of need. Many helped excluded
29 individuals by referring them on to statutory or formal provision, although such
30 activity depended on there being viable services. SCSOs tended to utilise bridging
31 capital by partnering with other community groups rather than linking (Putnam,
32 2003) **[[please supply reference]]** with local authorities and other bodies. Without
33 such connections, authorities failed to benefit from SCSOs' local knowledge and
34 SCSOs had no influence over wider service provision and had to find ways to resolve
35 people's problems that did not involve the state. The insularity of SCSOs was seen as
36 an indicator that formal organisations and institutions lacked interest in their activities.
37 We suggest that it may also be symptomatic of SCSOs' lack of confidence or skills
38 to engage more widely. Further research is necessary to explore the nature of, and
39 barriers/enablers to, wider interactions.

40 41 **Learning for, and from, community action**

42
43 As noted, throughout the 2000s there was substantial investment in 'capacity building'
44 in the voluntary sector and community groups through formal, often technical,
45 training, which it has been contended ignores adult learning theory (Wenger, 1998;
46 Thomas, 1999). Respondents argued that SCSOs learned through experience and,
47 with the exception of mandatory requirements (such as safeguarding), rarely accessed
48 formal learning opportunities (McCabe and Phillimore, 2012a). Indeed, rather than

1 approaching voluntary sector development agencies, activists tended to use social
2 networks to access skills and knowledge on an iterative basis. This involved, for example,
3 visiting other community shops, residents' groups or village halls, listening to their
4 experiences and adapting practice to their own particular community context. Peer
5 learning was, therefore, integral to group development. Learning was about being
6 more effective within the community rather than growing their organisation. What
7 emerged, therefore, was a substantial gap between policy expectations about how
8 SCSOs should learn and how they actually used learning to replicate, rather than
9 'scale up', alternative models of grassroots activity.

11 Challenges faced by SCSOs

13 In addition to the resource problems outlined above, respondents identified a wide
14 range of challenges that SCSOs had to overcome, including pressures to grow
15 and formalise. Respondents argued that growth would distance SCSOs from the
16 communities they represented, and lead to a loss of the unique qualities associated
17 with being "led by local people, for local people" (women's organisation respondent).
18 SCSOs were subject to unrealistic demands on their time from policy makers
19 who wanted them to attend partnership meetings without covering the costs of
20 attendance. Even where there was some dialogue with policy makers, the sheer scale
21 of structural inequalities was argued to continue while SCSOs "pick up the pieces"
22 (BME respondent).

23 Despite these challenges, respondents felt that SCSO were more sustainable than
24 formal CSOs in a recession. This was because "they are already at the bottom and
25 there is no way down" (BME respondent) and few were dependent on external
26 funding. The ability for activities to come and go according to need was viewed
27 by respondents as important. A faith respondent argued that "true voluntary and
28 community organisations exist because people want them to". Once they were no
29 longer wanted or needed, there was no reason to continue. Sometimes the closure of
30 an organisation was a sign of success: evidence that goals had been met, for example
31 the flood defence campaign cited earlier ceased. Respondents argued that the focus
32 on longevity enforced artificial sustainability on SCSOs, some of which had lost their
33 way and had no real reason to exist.

35 Discussion

37 Respondents argued that SCSOs made an important contribution to the quality
38 of life and wellbeing of individuals and communities. This has been recognised in
39 policy, particularly public health where SCSOs, through their capacity to create and
40 sustain social networks, are promoted as a means of influencing healthy behaviours
41 and, ultimately, relieving pressures on the National Health Service (DH, 2013). Such a
42 policy focus, however often fails to acknowledge that groups, while they may improve
43 participants' wellbeing, were not established to meet policy objectives and cannot
44 address the structural determinants of health inequalities (Friedli, 2012).

45 A wide range of claims were made by the intermediaries interviewed about the
46 function, distinctiveness and impact of the VCS. Clearly, the nature of those claims
47 varied according to the perspective of the interviewees and the role they undertook.
48 Nonetheless, some generalisations did emerge. SCSOs were seen as being broad in

1 scope, filling gaps in welfare and service provision both at neighbourhood level and
2 for interest groups, supporting Boateng (2002) and Wuthnow's (2004) claim that
3 SCSOs have the potential to meet specialist need. Their actions were motivated by a
4 desire to solve problems, give voice, help vulnerable people, maintain cultural identity
5 and/or make social connections. Actions emerged from common interests, a common
6 enemy or problem, gaps in service provision and social isolation (Rochester, 2013).

7 Respondents made the case for SCSOs being distinctive, with boundaries blurred
8 between the personal, the political and civic action (Anderson, 2013). Actions were
9 generally resourced from within communities using time, expertise, social networks
10 and whatever else people could lay their hands on. Respondents claimed that SCSOs
11 were distinctive because of their fluidity and flexibility. Lifecycles of actions varied
12 according to need. Some groups emerged in response to need, and disappeared once
13 the need was addressed. Many actions were ideologically or experientially driven
14 by people who wanted to make a difference to their own lives, or to those of their
15 community (Cooper, 2008; Henderson and Vercseg, 2010). Following Freire (1970),
16 there was evidence that local or community-specific knowledge was the key to
17 SCSO responsiveness. While different types of groups (ie, BME, rural and women's
18 groups) clearly operated within their own specific knowledge base, each used insider
19 knowledge to act. Insider knowledge combined with community embeddedness
20 enabled SCSOs to know which actions would be effective and trusted by the
21 community. Unconstrained by bureaucracy or regulation, SCSOs had autonomy, and
22 scope, to be radical. Respondents argued that complete freedom from hegemony – in
23 the form of government policy – was, as Alinsky (1971) suggested, fundamental to
24 their distinctiveness and effectiveness.

25 Some actions helped to meet local policy goals, and some groups were able to
26 influence local policy, but on the whole respondents agreed that the lack of set goals
27 enabled SCSOs to meet need effectively and quickly. Respondents felt that much
28 could, and should, be learned from SCSOs, both from their experiential and grounded
29 knowledge, and from their responsive, flexible and holistic approaches to delivery.
30 Yet SCSOs often addressed local problems without having the power to influence
31 the structural issues that underpinned the gaps and needs that they felt compelled
32 to address.

33 The 'secret' of SCSO success was attracting individuals with the enthusiasm and
34 personality to take people along with them; and the small size of groups and closeness
35 to their constituents. While SCSOs did sometimes help to address policy agendas in
36 employment, renewal and cohesion, it was clear that few respondents saw them as
37 a viable mechanism for large-scale delivery because they lacked the coverage and/
38 or consistency needed. Existence and performance of SCSO action was patchy and
39 not always located in proximity to need. Actions were dependent on the availability,
40 ongoing goodwill and motivation of volunteers. Social action was driven by ideology
41 and aided by sometimes insular social networks. SCSO delivery of policy goals could
42 not be forced through imposing a formalisation agenda or pushing the transfer of
43 local services into the hands of communities. There was support for Mohan's (2012)
44 claims regarding the lack of volunteer capacity. Not all neighbourhoods/interest groups
45 had the desire, resources or capacity to establish or contribute to SCSOs. Not all
46 volunteers had the right characteristics to lead organisations. Furthermore, voluntary
47 labour needed to be coupled with other resources, such as free space, if SCSOs were
48 to be able to operate. The impact of withdrawal of 'in-kind' support (eg, free access

to public buildings) remains an under-researched element of the impact of recession and austerity measures (McCabe and Phillimore, 2012b).

Respondents did indicate that some government initiatives had the potential to enable SCSOs to flourish through the adoption of asset-based approaches to community development models (rather than deficit-based) (Foot and Hopkins, 2010), elements of the localism agenda and the extension of community rights. The right environment depended on significant investment of time, resources or both. Meeting such needs may be difficult as resources continue to decline following long-term austerity measures. The advent of cuts in public services may have a double effect: reduced resources and more disadvantaged citizens. SCSOs will not thrive from support that pushes a particular agenda or from taking on contracts that compel them to deliver services in a particular way (Benson, 2014). Freedom and flexibility appeared to be the key to innovative actions delivered on a small scale but without, necessarily, the capacity to respond to wider needs (Newcastle CVS, 2012).

Thus, rather than moving to roll out service delivery to SCSOs or pushing them to formalise their activities, we argue that policy makers should focus on supporting them to work in their current, distinctive fashion. Policy could provide support by:

- identifying *good practice* in SCSOs;
- making that visible to those working in the sector;
- connecting SCSOs by providing funds for networking and study visits;
- offering free safeguarding and health and safety training;
- making small pots of money available that SCSOs can apply for to cover insurance costs;
- ensuring that there are cost-free spaces in which people can meet.

There are examples of this as a re-emergent approach to SCSOs – generally within the narrow constraints of such activities producing cost savings for the state and bringing added/social value (Fujiwara et al, 2013).

Conclusion

The data presented within this article bring new knowledge about the importance and distinctiveness of SCSOs. Research with intermediaries has enabled us to gain an overview of some of the strengths and weaknesses of SCSOs and to begin to focus on the potential of this under-researched part of civil society. Despite their diverse nature, it is clear that there are some common features of SCSO activity. While they utilise different and distinct knowledge garnered from lived experience, they do so in a similar way. They share common ground in terms of:

- being led by, and for, their constituents;
- being driven by need;
- responding to gaps in mainstream provision;
- sharing common interests;
- acting holistically and flexibly;
- using resources sourced internally.

1 It is difficult to argue against increasing the profile of SCSOs. Their distinctive insight
2 into local life could be used in a radical way to shape, rather than deliver, policy,
3 helping to inform on the nature of structural inequality, and to develop solutions
4 on how to address it. Further research is needed to explore directly with SCSOs,
5 the contribution they make within their communities and their views about the
6 roles they might play in relation to policy agendas. It is important to understand
7 their motivations, the barriers they face and their aspirations. Our findings suggest
8 that policy makers need to be mindful that there are limits to what can be achieved
9 by small organisations. Where they do deliver services they do so for and with the
10 public: but these are not public services. Intermediaries in this study felt that there
11 was no appetite, following the Localism Act 2011, to 'scale up' and take on such a
12 role and that SCSOs have their own aspirations regardless of policy discourse. They
13 are unable to provide sufficiently uniform coverage to overcome the structural issues
14 that underpin the social and economic problems they seek to address. Reflecting
15 on the Big Society and subsequent initiatives, Taylor (2011: 262) asks: Will the most
16 vulnerable in society be co-opted into replacing what the state used to provide? ...
17 citizen centred services should not mean people being faced with a choice of providing
18 for themselves or getting nothing'.

19 Taylor's argument, and that of our respondents, raises questions about where
20 SCSOs can realistically fit in terms of welfare reform. It appears that SCSOs emerge
21 through a complex mix of motivations, aspirations and experience that may be hard
22 to manufacture. It is unlikely to be possible to force the development of SCSOs or
23 to expect local people everywhere to deliver services that will meet the needs of
24 everyone. Ultimately, the vibrancy of SCSOs depends on people having the skills,
25 motivation, time, resources and choice to contribute. Policy makers may consider
26 that, as our respondents suggest, co-option of social action is likely to undermine it
27 (Ledwith, 2005). Rather than co-opt they might develop mechanisms to listen to
28 the voices of SCSOs, which, we suggest, may be an early-warning system for the
29 emergence, or expansion of, social problems, given that they work so closely with
30 their constituents. Any attempt to force growth in SCSOs, or to change their role and
31 function, is likely to disempower communities and inhibit the organic emergence of
32 social action that Freire (1970) and Ledwith (1997) argue is critical to citizen control.
33 While support for SCSOs appears to be important in contributing to the quality of
34 community life, imposing policy agendas may impact on the ways of working that
35 make some SCSOs effective in getting into the places that the state and formal civil
36 society cannot reach and undermine attempts to rebalance the relationship between
37 people and the state (Chanan and Miller, 2010). In short, SCSOs may be important
38 for a healthy and vibrant society, but are unlikely to be a panacea for all society's ills.

39 **Acknowledgement**

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41 which supported the research and made this article possible. **[[for all those references
42 that are not cited ~ indicated below ~ please either state where they should be
43 cited or give an instruction to delete the reference]]**
44
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