Grassroots civil society at crossroads

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Grassroots Civil Society at Crossroads: staying on the path to independence or turning onto the UK Government's route to localism?

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ABSTRACT

Within the context of acute public spending cuts and the fervent push towards *localism*, the UK government is increasingly looking outwards to community- and citizen-led action for solutions to long-term social problems and taking on public services. The extent to which these groups have the capacity and willingness to take on politicized roles beyond their purpose and function is, however, not well understood. By reflecting on findings primarily from a 'street-level mapping' project, in this paper discussion focuses on the potential implications arising from grassroots' cooption.

Introduction

The UK's crossroads case study focuses on grassroots aspects of civil society. In particular, focus is on gatherings of social- and community-participation and activities that do not appear in regulatory listings. 'Grassroots' civil society has a long-documented history, and scholars often assert that not only are they at the heart of the voluntary and community sector (Billis 1993), but that they are the dominant feature of its landscape constituting, in some estimates, almost nine times as much activity as their mainstream counterparts (Mohan 2012; Phillimore et al 2009). Despite this, empirically they remain one of the least researched, and therefore least understood, parts of the sector (Phillimore & McCabe 2009; Toepler 2003; Smith 2000). By drawing on key findings from a 'street-level' mapping study designed to identify 'unregistered' community and social activities and other work on grassroots groups carried out by the Third Sector Research Centre, we reflect upon the wider implications of bringing grassroots groups into the mainstream political arena, thereby allocating them a function that may fall outside of their self-defined mission or purpose. We focus in particular upon their diversity, local and contextual specificity and wider connections with other organisations that provide space, skills and resources (see also Soteri-Proctor and Alcock 2012).

This paper is particularly timely given the UK's successive governments' growing, yet shifting, social and political interest towards less formal aspects of civil society. The sector's engagement with government during New Labour's administration (1990s-2010) was one of 'high-level' (Alcock and Kendall 2010) and adeptly characterized by Kendall (2009) as 'hyperactive-mainstreaming' when describing the sector's increasingly centralised role in policy initiatives, including public service delivery. Much of the focus of this critique, however, was on registered or formal civil society activity; those larger type organisations

with capacity to engage with public and policy initiatives. With the onset of the economic crisis, a newly elected coalition government and a strategy of unprecedented public-spending cuts, scholars are talking of shifting relationships between the state and the sector. Whilst the coalition government remains interested in the role of the sector, there is increasing interest in civic and social participation, particularly at local and neighbourhood level. What we are now seeing could perhaps be an era depicted as *'hyper-localism'* with the Coalition government's push towards decentralisation, coupled with increasing interest in the role of citizens and local communities to identify and resolve social and political problems.

New policies set out in the Localism Act 2011 and in the Open Public Services White Paper (HM Government 2012) placed emphasis on 'community rights', including suggestions that local people ought to challenge, manage and even buy state-owned assets and services to run them themselves. The presence of functioning, community-run, small-scale civil society organizations is at the heart of these plans. In this paper we argue that grassroots civil society groups are at a crossroads. They can either continue down their own path, setting their own agendas, and operating in their own ways, or they might respond to the challenges being set them by the current Government and attempt to provide services and represent their communities at local level. By reviewing findings from a selection of our studies on grassroots groups, particularly the 'street-level' mapping project, we raise questions on the extent to which it is possible for grassroots organisations to respond to the new agenda. In so doing we consider the challenges and opportunities currently faced.

Background

Civil Society's long and varied history is explored in an eclectic mix of literature, and includes historical accounts that can be traced as far back as 10,000 years to the Neolithic revolution, when humans settled in villages (Smith, 2000). Focusing on the UK, Savage (2013) provides a wealth of material on different components of the sector's histories. These include reference to grassroots political associations that mobilized to campaign for civil liberties eventually leading to the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 and groups that provided health and other support services such as Alms Houses. Evidence of volunteering continued in the Elizabethan times with efforts to provide relief to the poor while the Victorian era has been characterized as the '*Golden Age of small associations of piety*', reflecting the rise in faith-based organising to meet the needs of the frail and elderly (Hilton et al. 2012 and Savage 2013).

Civil Society is sometimes described as the space between the market and the state (Kendall 2005) and covers a wide range of groups and activities, including those engaged in protest and mobilizing communities, local grassroots groups that provide self-help and mutual-aid, non-profit organisations that offer a breadth of services, including advice, health care and

housing and informal organizations that offer opportunities for leisure, fun, socialization or 'self-actualisation' (Beauclerk *et al.* 2011; Lawson 2009). They vary in their operational and structural aspects, legal status, and draw on a variety of resources with some depending on little, if any, funds and others having multi-million pound incomes.

With this diversity then, there is no surprise that the very notion of 'Civil Society' is much debated. There are some who assert the concept should only be applied to actions that have the normative purpose of creating benefit to society. Others use the term as a descriptor to cover broader organisations and associations (Trägårdh 2007). The debate about what constitutes civil society activity includes consideration of role and function; relationship with the state and other sectors, and whether civil society can be considered a discrete sector at all. If civil society is assumed, conceptually at least, to be a distinct sector, it is multi-dimensional and comprises a potage of activities, groups and organisations within its blurred and fuzzy boundaries. Much literature treats Civil Society synonymously with Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and has overlooked perhaps the longest-standing, most numerous and diverse components of Civil Society: local grassroots associations. By grassroots associations we mean small-scale, self-organised and largely self-resourced groups and activities.

Whilst some grassroots associations do appear on lists of regulatory bodies established by Government (for example, the Charity Commission and CIC), many go 'uncounted' and have been described as operating below (the regulatory) radar (Phillimore et al. 2009). The extent of under-counting is debated: with wide ranging estimate-ratios on the size of the known population vis-a-vis the 'hidden population' with factors from one to nine (Mohan 2012; McCabe and Phillimore 2009). Whatever their size, 'uncounted' grassroots make up a significant, if not the largest, part of civil society and are considered by some to be the heart of the sector and even the core component from which mainstream civil society organistions originated (Smith 2000 and Billis 1993).

Scholastic inquiry has however tended to focus on understanding more formal aspects of the sector with the tendency to use regulatory listings as population inventories to sample and profile activities of the civil society sector. In the UK and the US, for example, much research draws on data from listings generated through administrative data sets such as registered charities from the Charity Commission and the Internal Revenue Service respectively (Mohan 2012 and Grónjberg et al. 2010). This bias towards formal aspects of the sector is referred to as the 'flat-earth approach' by Horton Smith (1997) wherein 'unregistered" entities are excluded from attempts to understand civil society. Such an approach, which also dominates the type of research in development and non-profit studies (see Beauclerk et al. 2011; Horton Smith 1997) results in, at best, an incomplete and, at worse, a misleading picture of the broader landscape. Omitting unregistered activity has profound implications for sector research and may well have resulted in the development of

theories on 'charity deserts' and voluntary-resource poor areas which perhaps overlooks wide ranging activities that lack visibility (Mohan 2011; Williams 2011).

A combination of reasons can help to explain such an approach. These include the way in which NGOs have been conflated with the notion of Civil Society and over-emphasis on organizations perceived to make a higher economic or social contribution to society such as those contracted to deliver public services. On a more practical level the overlooking of grassroots Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) may also result from the paucity of data available, including as we outline above, the absence of a comprehensive database on *all* civil society activity regardless of legal status, scale or income.

Recognition of this disparity, accompanied with renewed discourse on the 'disconnection' between development practitioners and the 'uncounted' grassroots has generated increased interest in improving the empirical evidence on wider aspects of Civil Society (Beauclerk et al 2011). Scholars have called for a broader use of different methodologies in order to understand grassroots groups and, at a basic level, to develop more comprehensive population lists that capture these much neglected parts of the sector (Glover 2004, McCabe and Phillimore 2012 and Smith 2000).

In the field of international development the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) and other partners have initiated a global call to go 'beyond NGOs' to thoroughly examine the fabric of local society. As part of this call to 'revalue' the less visible aspects of Civil Society, several case studies were presented at the INTRAC 2008 Conference to demonstrate that the grassroots are 'alive and kicking'. One such study identified 31 types of civil society associations (Beauclerk et al. 2011). Responding to findings like this, INTRAC developed the Cross-Roads projects to showcase different components of Civil Society. In this paper we use the key findings from a Street-Level mapping study undertaken in the UK to further evidence the diverse workings of "below-the-radar" civil society and consider the direction that grassroots activity might take as it reaches the crossroads emerging from the Coalition's localism agenda.

The **Street-Level mapping project**
The UK Cross Road's case study focuses on data drawn primarily from TSRC's Street-Level Mapping project, herein referred to as SLM. The SLM project was carried out for three reasons: to generate empirical evidence to critically engage with theoretical debates on existing definitions and classifications of civil society; to examine the wider policy implications of findings; and to contribute towards advancing methods to reach these overlooked activities. The SLM project was designed to identify grassroots activities, groups and community action that occurred on a regular, rather than one-off basis, were "below-

the-radar" in that they did not appear in regulatory lists but went beyond mutual self-help familial settings (i.e friends and family helping each other).

Fieldwork was undertaken in two urban neighbourhoods, building on methods used in the earlier Local Voluntary Activity Surveys (LOVAS) study in the 1990s (Marshall 1997). Approaches used by LOVAS included intensive fieldwork by mapping-on-the ground to identify volunteering in its entirety, across different sectors. The vision was to develop a method that could be replicated by others to create subsequent population frameworks to further analyses on different aspects of volunteering (Marshall et al. 1997). Using similar approaches, this was adopted for a different purpose in the SLM project: to identify below-radar community associations (Soteri-Proctor 2011). Fieldwork was undertaken in 11 streets across two sites with the first focusing on searches in six streets and the second emphasizing searches in and around three (of five identified) communal spaces. Actions involved walking-the-streets, visits to public spaces such as community centres, faith-based organisations, health centres and shops. Where possible informal interviews and conversations were undertaken with individuals active in, and familiar with, the local area such as caretakers of public buildings, and neighbourhood management officers. Secondary data was collated from websites and lists given to us by individuals and organisations. Information generated from searches was entered on a database, cleaned and de-duplicated and later cross-referenced with groups appearing in regulatory lists collated by Guidestar (see Soteri-Proctor and Alcock 2012). Grassroots activities operating in two community hubs were followed over time, one in each of the two locations as part of TSRC's longitudinal project, Real Times (Macmillan et al. 2011).

Street-level mapping towards a broader picture of Civil Society

Adopting 'street-level' mapping tools in search of "below the radar" civil society actions can be equated with using a microscopic lens to view entities that could be missed using a standard lens. SLM enabled us to provide a much closer and more granular picture of the civil society landscape. Indeed, continuing this metaphor, when looking through the microscope we found, in just 11 streets, 58 activities that did not appear on regulatory lists. Some did not have names and addresses (of their own) and may not have even considered themselves to be a 'group'. Given that the time we spent searching was inevitably limited we expect that there were yet more activities operating in these areas. For example we knew of shared spaces operated by public, voluntary, and faith-based organisations that we did not have time to access during our fieldwork. Putting aside these omissions, the presence of 58 grassroots activities reveals a broader civil society landscape than that captured from regulatory lists alone.

The groups identified undertook a wide variety of activities, supporting specific sections of the community, such as faith or ethnic groups, elderly or disabled people, or connecting people around a particular interest. These local grassroots activities were incredibly diverse,

locally-specific and particular in the activities with which they engaged. They include self-support groups such as Death Committees (mutual-aid to finance funerals) and those who experience domestic violence and groups run by volunteers to support refugees and asylum seekers with social welfare problems. One group offered lone parents a chance to meet others and help their children to learn through play, and another arranged social activities for Eastern European women. There was a community farm looking after abandoned animals and a local activist group working to improve their environment. In addition, there were types of activity that might be described as 'serious leisure' (Stebbins 2007), which included the systematic pursuit of amateur and hobby activities, such as a cine club and a dowser group.

The key feature shared by all 58 activities was that they were all below-the-regulatory radar at the time of fieldwork. Beyond this, however, they were diverse in the communities that they served and in the activities they organised and that these were well embedded into their local communities. Reflecting this, provisions were often 'particular', or specific, as they responded to the needs that emerged from local people. A multitude of 'communities of interest' and sometimes communities of 'locality' were found operating in these areas. Furthermore, there was evidence to show that people often belonged to more than one group. Equally of interest, the SLM study showed that whilst many of these diverse activities required little if any direct funds to go about their daily business, several of them operated from the same space and drew upon the resources available within these.

It is these characteristics that are the focus for the remainder of this paper. In particular, discussion focuses on the wider socio-political implications of government's increasing interest in bringing citizens and community-based action to the centre of their policies to take on public services and identify and resolve local social and political problems (HM Government 2012). By reviewing the increasing policitization of communities by government, discussion also focuses on the potential challenges to groups whose purpose, aspirations and function do not necessarily fit with the UK Government's objectives.

Connections, host organisations: space and people
One of the important features uncovered by the SLM approach is that below-radar grassroots groups do not operate as islands; and, instead, draw creatively on others' resources, including networks, physical space, knowledge and skills. By doing so they generate and circulate resources around their communities, networks and elsewhere. This can be illustrated by an observation of a drop-in session at a volunteer-run refugee support group using low cost space in a community centre. A young man appeared

at the centre without an appointment. A volunteer, Brenda (a pseudonym), identified that he was about to be made homeless and had no access to public funds. Struggling to understand his patchy English Brenda made a few calls. Within 20 minutes a woman arrived with her child in a buggy. Brenda bounced the baby whilst the woman explored the young man's problem, and the support needed. Equipped with this information Brenda made further telephone calls securing an appointment with the Housing Office. The woman's husband offered the man a lift to the Housing Office before it closed.

This made-to-measure service relied upon the availability of several resources: the physical space in which to operate and the skills and resources of volunteers, many of whom were themselves service-users. The TSRC's work in different geographical areas shows that many organisations, in urban and rural areas, generate and are part of informal networks of activity linked by 'community-building bricoleurs' who are active in several organisations often using the same community hub (Soteri-Proctor & Alcock 2012).

While all groups had few financial resources, all depended on some resource. Volunteer time was possibly the most important, coupled with the skills that individuals brought with them from their employment or personal life, for example, in the case of a tenants and residents association the group leader comments on the skills offered by one female volunteer: "*she is a nurse and very good at calming people down*" (quoted in McCabe & Phillimore 2012b). Use of a social space was often important particularly where groups were supported directly or indirectly by paid or unpaid staff that were responsible for the management of the buildings they used. Use of shared space also increased opportunities for collaboration with other groups thereby enabling all concerned to capitalize on their skills and connections. Furthermore many groups relied heavily on advice and guidance from infrastructure organizations and local authority advisors. Word of mouth from such organizations helped them to understand statutory responsibilities around issues such as safe-guarding, or health and safety, as well as drawing attention to small funding pots that could help to pay for equipment and other necessities.

While the Coalition government tries to foster localism by giving local groups and people new powers to take over the delivery of services, other policies, often associated with the cuts in local authority or infrastructure body funding, may have a knock on effect on the viability of grassroots activities. Expanding on this, Wilcox (2011) notes that community buildings, many of which support below-radar grassroots activities, are in danger of becoming unsustainable in the face of cuts. The potential loss of space from such organisations may result in the lack of somewhere for grassroots groups to meet, and

consequently lead to a reduction in opportunities for collaboration and in access to the expertise of 'community-building bricoleurs' who operate in these spaces. As the squeeze on the public-purse intensifies pressure on those intermediary organisations offering space and expertise and civic and community engagement may be inadvertently pushed from public spaces. As austerity cuts accumulate there is a danger of a multiplier effect, or 'compound disadvantage' whereby grassroots organizations are disadvantaged from several directions: losing access to space, expertise, non-financial resources and volunteer time (McCabe and Phillimore 2012a).

Grassroots civil society at a crossroads

One might consider the variations and specificity of the grassroots sector as a perfect-fit with successive UK governments' ambitions to devolve policy to the local-level for communities. Such approaches offer the opportunity for communities to identify and resolve their own problems: a vision rapidly materialising under the Coalition government, following the introduction of the Localism Act, a 'decentralisation team' in the Department for Communities and Local Government and a myriad of other policy initiatives (McCabe 2011).

Governments' increasing politicisation of the idea of communities, which includes increasing expectations on citizens and local communities to engage with the political agenda, raises important questions on the extent to which social civic engagement, even within its conglomerate mass, has the capacity and even the interest to engage with something they are not set up to do in the first place. Further still, should enough groups decide to rise to this challenge, it is unlikely they would offer services of consistent quality or geographical coverage to meet the needs of all citizens. Findings from SLM showed that the types of activity organized were highly specific to the needs of people living in specific geographic or demographic communities. For example the Death Committee operated for one ethnic group, in one local area and emerged from a desire to meet a very specific need: finances to help ensure funeral costs could be covered. Similarly the group that focused upon building bridges between Russian and British women operated solely for that purpose in a particular neighbourhood. Earlier TSRC work on the distinctiveness of "below the radar" activity noted that individuals who lead such activities, and the communities who participate, are motivated by very specific needs. Further still, that they do not necessarily have the desire to extend their services to other individuals or provide other services; and thus arguably would be reluctant to rise to the challenge of taking on the delivery of local services (McCabe and Phillimore 2012b).

Without undermining the importance of these sometimes niche and specific interests and activities, if findings from our work reflect the types of activities operating in other geographical areas, they show that community and social participation not only reflect

particular interests, but that these appeal to limited communities. With such activities operating at micro-scale, the relevance and practicality of rolling them out even at a wider local level raises questions about their relevance to other communities. Groups that are not regulated, tend to be organic and spontaneous. The nature and quality of what is delivered tends to be driven by personalities, their interests, skills and knowledge (see Phillimore et al. 2010). All of which raise questions about, for example, the (imbalance) of power and representation. Whilst groups are incredibly diverse, and are likely to reach some of the most vulnerable groups in society, their activities are not necessarily 'inclusive'. Indeed, other work from TSRC show that some groups may operate in ways they either intentionally or inadvertently exclude some sectors of the population. For example a review of the impact of grassroots arts organizations showed that many activities were gendered or ethnicized (see Ramsden et al. 2011).

As noted earlier, a key characteristic shared by grassroots groups and activities in the SLM study was that they operated below-the-regulatory-radar. Their distinctiveness lies in the lack of institutional intervention, being able to operate outside of formal policy and without funds that have "strings attached". Whilst it is clearly important that policy makers are aware of the contributions made by their work, for example the health benefits that emerge from leisure activities such as line-dancing (Guetzkow 2002), greater intervention in such activities, or attempting to use them as a vehicle for service delivery may undermine the very nature of these organizations. There is a danger that the contributions grassroots activities make to their local communities through the provision of "serious leisure" and micro-level self-help may be lost if group leaders and other volunteers are pushed to undertake activities that are outside of their areas of interest or their comfort zone. Some evidence exists that emergence of grassroots activities depend upon very specific motivations and emotional responses to problems (Phillimore et al 2010). Take these away and group organizers may be reluctant to continue participating.

If policy shifts towards a reliance on small voluntary groups for the delivery of services and other initiatives, there is a risk that groups do not possess the right ingredients in terms of skills, resources and knowledge to be able to deliver effectively. Furthermore groups may lack the motivation to deliver to government initiatives. Certainly many of the groups identified through SLM were simply going about their daily business supporting each other in ways that were useful to them with no regard to Government policy or objectives. There are also doubts whether the charismatic leaders who have the vision and drive to establish an organization have the appropriate skills to deliver services. Grassroots activities tend to emerge organically in response to need or desire. In light of their patchy coverage expecting them to provide services for all is problematic; something of a post-code lottery. Certainly research examining coverage in the formal sector found that affluent areas tended to support more voluntary and community sector activity than less affluent areas (Mohan 2012b; Clifford 2012). These patterns may be replicated in the informal sector.   Thus there

are multiple concerns about groups' motivations, capacity, energy and ability to provide services that are not part of their raison d'être.

Concluding remarks

The SLM methodology shows potential for generating detailed and nuanced information at local and neighbourhood level; particularly in the context of uncovering the lesser-known community activities beyond government 'regulatory-radars'. Others who have recently replicated the SLM approach too have revealed interesting social and political dynamics within local environments by uncovering largely overlooked community and civil associations (Faulkner 2012; Whitehead 2012).

By providing a more granular picture of this often empirically neglected part of civil society we show that whilst grassroots groups exist and evolve without (direct) government intervention or institutional resources, they have a place in local and micro British society. Grassroots implies these organizations and actions are the foundations for at least some aspects of civil society activity. Understanding the resources and environment they need to survive or grow (possibly into formal civil society organizations) can help policymakers to ensure that they are not unintentionally undermined by changes in funding regimes or policy. This is particularly important at a time of 'uncertainty' contextually bound in austerity, devolution and unprecedented 'cutbacks' in UK public services and social- and economic- policy initiatives. There appears to be a 'decoupling' process underway, at least within the formal side of civil society with increasing emphasis on citizens' and community groups. This development is reflected in increasing citizen- and community-led social action policy initiatives including the Community Organising Programme, a £15 million investment to train local leaders to train local leaders to (re)build their communities, Participatory Budgeting to encourage local communities to identify and prioritise local service delivery, and the continuing decentralisation of policies to local authorities further downwards to neighbourhood level (McCabe 2011).

SLM allows us to reveal untold stories about the diversity and specificity of grassroots groups and their relationships and networks. This increased understanding has enabled us to consider the implications of governments co-opting the grassroots sector for political ends as they pursue localised policy agendas and encourage engagement in activities beyond their interests or remit. Our findings suggest that, at least in our two study areas, grassroots activities provide little potential for devolved service delivery or civic engagement. While in some areas and for some socio-demographic groups there is a desire to organize self-help groups or to address social isolation through the establishment of informal friendship groups the emergence of such activities is highly dependent on neighbourhood opportunity structures.

Grassroots actions require the right mix of motivations, personalities, skills, space, information, and resources. Emergent findings from TSRC work that looks at the resources required by grassroots activities to establish their actions and to meet their goals note the wide range of skills that groups drew upon from within their local area. Several interviewees referred to the importance of luck or "being in the right place at the right time". It is this element of fortune, which in reality depends upon social and economic resource distribution, which mean grassroots action lacks sufficient coverage to respond to localism. Indeed while there may be the occasional group with the right ingredients to actively engage in the agenda there is a very real danger that co-option of grassroots activity may disenchant local activists and volunteers whose reasons for involvement may be highly motivation-specific. There is some evidence to suggest that some activities deliberately seek to remain "under the radar" to retain control of their destinies (McCabe et al 2011). While grassroots activities do not provide a blanket solution to all local problems, the loss of their actions is likely to have an impact, if it means the loss of opportunities for collaboration and community building that can enhance the well-being of individuals and wider communities. Further research is needed to bring an understanding of the role and potential of grassroots activity in a wider variety of neighbourhoods and to follow the fortunes of these activities as policy, in terms of austerity and localism, impact upon the wider environment in which grassroots groups operate.

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