Building Third Sector Research Capacity to address the challenges and opportunities of social cohesion, working with established communities as well as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

Marjorie Mayo, Zoraida Bendek, Carol Packham

Goldsmiths, University of London, London, United Kingdom

The Third Sector in Britain has indeed been playing an expanded role – including the development of a number of government programmes to address the democratic deficit (an increasingly evident problem given widespread disillusion with formal politics in the wake of recent scandals) and to promote active citizenship more generally (as exemplified in the programmes to promote Active Learning for Active Citizenship and the ‘Take Part’ initiative) (Crick, 2001, Annette, 2003, Woodward, 2004). More recently, the government Office of the Third Sector has supported a national programme to increase research capacity in the Third Sector.

The proposed paper draws upon experiences of research within both of these programmes, exploring some of the challenges as well as some of the opportunities inherent in working within these types of programme (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004, Mayo and Rooke, 2006). The particular focus of our paper will be upon the challenges and opportunities inherent in research capacity building with Third Sector Organisations concerned with issues of social cohesion, working with established communities as well as with refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers.

In the current context, following the events of 9/11, disturbances in northern towns (Cantle, 2005) and the London bombings, (compounded by anxieties related to increased migration flows in recent years), there have been disturbing expressions of tensions between newer and more established communities, including established minority communities, tensions that are being exploited by the Far Right. Refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers are all being blamed for rising unemployment and increasing pressures on public services in a period of public expenditure constraint, following the banking crisis that shook the City of London last year, in 2008. Although it is important not to exaggerate these tensions as evidence from the Citizenship Survey demonstrates, this situation poses particular challenges for Third Sector organisations concerned to advocate and where possible to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable groups, but without exacerbating tensions with established communities, where residents are also, in so many cases, experiencing their own problems accessing jobs and public services (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007, Blake et al, 2008).

Our research has been developed through these government initiatives to strengthen civil society, promoting learning for active citizenship via ‘Active Learning for Active Citizenship’ and, more recently, via the ‘Take Part’ initiative and the programme to strengthen research capacity in Third Sector organisations. Having summarised some of the challenges as well as the opportunities associated with working within such government programmes, the first section of the paper will set out the conclusions from research arising from the ‘Active Learning for Active Citizenship’ programme. This will focus upon ways in which Third Sector organisations succeeded in developing innovative responses to some of the challenges faced by new communities and their longer established neighbours. These achievements were realised even within a more contested policy context, overall.

The second part of the paper will move on to explore findings as these are emerging from the current programme to build research capacity in the Third Sector, focussing, here too, upon projects with Third Sector organisations concerned with issues of social solidarity and
cohesion. In particular, the paper will focus upon the case study of an action research partnership between university-based researchers and a Third Sector organisation working with refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers. The organisation has a long and successful track record of service delivery, and advocacy, working with and through volunteers who have, in so many cases, themselves experienced the challenges of being a refugee/asylum seeker/migrant worker. The aim of this particular project has been to develop research tools with the organisation to support their advocacy work, with the wider emphasis upon promoting solidarity within and between new and established communities.

Whilst the research from Active Learning for Active Citizenship/Take Part and from the research capacity building programme can provide illustrations of some of the challenges inherent in government programmes to support the Third Sector, the researchers have also identified evidence of creative responses. As the research will demonstrate, Third Sector organisations have also been using these spaces to strengthen their work, including their work with some of the most vulnerable groups in society, in the current context.

References


Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007) Our Shared Future, Wetherby: Department for Communities and Local Government


