

What now for the voluntary sector?

Axel Kaehne



What now for the voluntary sector? – Axel Kaehne, Chair of GORWEL, reflects on the Carnegie Challenge Debate at Cardiff Millenium Centre

The last three decades have seen a phenomenal transformation of the voluntary sector in the UK. What used to be populated by predominantly small charities with modest ambitions is now an arena crowded with organisations running multi-million pound service delivery operations. Wales has been no exception to this transition of the third sector from small support to large scale core delivery structures. Parallel to this, local and central government metamorphosed from main deliverer of public services into broker of the same.

This role change of the voluntary sector has created enormous opportunities in economic, financial and charitable terms, yet also altered the nature and position of the sector vis-à-vis the state. As Wales is slowly exiting one of the worst economic crises in generations, the question facing the voluntary sector is: Where does it go from here? The recent Carnegie Challenge Debate which was organised by the Welsh Council for Voluntary Action and took place at the Millenium Centre in Cardiff on 24th November this year tried to produce some ideas, if not answers to this question.

There was agreement amongst the panel members that the voluntary sector's role faced serious challenges in the years to come. Some on the panel argued to strengthen the advocacy role of the voluntary sector whilst others were more skeptical about its ability to speak 'truth to power' given the deep involvement of the voluntary sector with service delivery.

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It was fascinating to see that those who were optimistic about the sector's critical role were casting it as an advocate of the poor. Others questioned the assumption that there is an automatic right of the sector to speak for the dispossessed. The relationship between the sector and the state, so they argued, was just as complex as that between citizens and the sector itself. The assumption that the sector could act as a representative of the voiceless neglected the complexities of communities

at a time of interest fragmentation, individualisation and fracturing of collective solidarity.

Interestingly, the various policy agendas that shape service delivery contribute to this ambivalent position of the voluntary sector vis-à-vis the state and the citizens. Personalisation of services requires organisations to take account of the individual needs of clients, tailoring support, whilst co-production remains the watch-word for service development. The latter is deeply contested in its scope as well as exact meaning, and there was some exasperation amongst the panel members as to the potential vacuity of the concept as it operated in existing strongly asymmetrical relationships between consumers and producers of services.

In Wales, the prominence of the voluntary sector has deep historical roots that reflect traditionally strong community bonds. In the last century however, as Wales

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felt the more centralizing features of government, the voluntary sector re-defined itself as a delivery mechanism, similar to changes in England. It was acknowledged by the panel that, today, the voluntary sector offered a highly diverse landscape with small and large players, some in symbiotic relationship with government in Cardiff whilst others perceiving themselves as mitigating forces of damaging government policies.

Panel members also noted another role of the voluntary sector, as producer of evidence to influence policy. There was some criticism that the voluntary sector may not have sufficient capacity to produce reliable and robust evidence to significantly influence government policy. The issue is one of scale and critical mass. Small scale studies still dominate the voluntary sector research output which often fail to impact on government policy. However, the recent report on poverty by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation demonstrated that voluntary organisations can effectively inform public debates on key issues.

So, what now for the voluntary sector? I think there was a recognition amongst the panel that the fundamental transformation of the voluntary sector over the last decades created a vibrant and highly diverse organisational landscape. This has led to a re-definition of the identity and role of some organisations within the delivery and policy field. One of the unchallenged assumptions of the sector is that it represents the disenfranchised communities, those left behind. Yet, there is a certain simplicity to this idea that is hard to sustain. The voluntary sector is neither the advocate of the dispossessed nor simply a delivery mechanism for the government. Its role is ambivalent, contradictory and it has developed vested interests that centre on protecting its own workforce. A better awareness of this janus-faced nature of the voluntary sector will go a long way to re-appraise its critical contribution to maintaining a vibrant and healthy society in times of crisis.

If you wish to make a comment on Axel Kaehne's short article then you can email him directly at akaehne@gorwel.co