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Somewhere over the rainbow – third sector research in and beyond coronavirus

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has rapidly become a multi-faceted global crisis disrupting economies, livelihoods and ways of life, with significant ramifications for the third sector. This article seeks to prompt a conversation about third sector research agendas which might be animated in and beyond coronavirus, focusing primarily on the experience of the sector in the UK but including references globally. After a brief discussion of the acute three-dimensional crisis facing the sector, the article raises questions for now and later at three inter-connected levels: of practice, organisation and society. The paper concludes with a call for critically engaged curiosity about the role and fortunes of the third sector in a time of lockdown.

Keywords

Coronavirus, Covid-19, third sector, charity

Introduction

What sense are we to make of coronavirus, its pervasive but varied impact on livelihoods and ways of life, the rapid reordering of assumptions and priorities, and the possibilities for positive social and economic reconstruction in its aftermath? As third sector scholars and researchers, we turn our attention and expertise to new appreciations of recast roles, positions and contributions of voluntary action and civil society in the current crisis. In doing so we might ask how third sector research, broadly understood, responds to the pandemic: what research questions and agendas might be animated in and beyond coronavirus?

On the 'gentleness' of charity

In the UK on 8th April 2020, Rishi Sunak, the very new Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, announced a £750m package of support for the charity sector struggling with the impact of coronavirus. He was fronting the government's daily press conference, and amidst the bleak numbers charting the pandemic's rising death toll, the charity announcement was the daily good news story. He linked the upsurge of charitable and community responses to Covid-19 to values of kindness, decency, compassion and neighbourliness, and was moved to conclude that: '*At this time, when many are hurting and tired and confined, we need the gentleness of charities in our lives. It gives us hope. It makes us stronger. And it reminds us: we depend on each other*' (Sunak, 2020). Alongside the details of the long-awaited announcement, what is striking is the particular framing of

charitable or third sector activity. It emphasises a conservative perspective on charity as an emblematic expression of certain traditional values. These might very well characterise a great deal of charitable motivation and activity, but inevitably voluntary action involves a far more complex, diverse and contested array of values. There is no mention here of social justice, solidarity and promoting human rights, nor of paternalism, status competition and protecting exclusionary identities. The apparent 'gentleness' of charities somewhat misunderstands and undervalues the work of many organisations working at the sharp edge with the most vulnerable individuals and marginalised communities, on issues such as poverty and destitution, food hunger, homelessness, substance misuse and domestic abuse. Nevertheless, the statement raises important questions of how third sector activity is being understood, framed and valued at a time of crisis.

The three-dimensional crisis of the third sector

Although there are similarities, the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the third sector is not the same as the experience of austerity through the 2010s. In the UK, many third sector organisations – charities, community organisations and social enterprise - faced severe income shortfalls as a result of the 2008 financial crisis and recession, and the subsequent Conservative-led programme of austerity. Those in receipt of public funds and working broadly in social welfare and in disadvantaged areas were especially hard hit (Clifford, 2017). Austerity subsequently morphed into a broader attack on the sector's campaigning activity and increasing concern with governance, leadership and apparently declining public trust.

The impact of coronavirus is of a different scale and order, in that many third sector organisations are facing an acute *three-dimensional crisis of resourcing, operation and demand*. This is highly contingent on local circumstances and different national and local policy responses to Covid-19, and research to shed light on these immediate experiences is only just emerging. First, multiple sources of income have fallen away or become vulnerable in just a matter of weeks: trading income, for example from charity shops or venue hire, has collapsed during lockdown, temporarily calling into question the social enterprise strategy of increasing earned income; philanthropic resources continue to be hit by the collapse in stock markets; fundraising income, especially through events and face-to-face donations, are in jeopardy. An early survey found that charities in the UK expect an average decline in annual income of 31% compared with the previous year, including an average 48% fall in voluntary income (Institute of Fundraising et al, 2020; see also Madden et al, 2020). But second, crucially, operations have also been curtailed. The sheer work of organising and undertaking activities has been undermined as staff and volunteers have been advised to stay at home, they may be unwell and/or self-isolating, caring for relatives, or otherwise unable to carry out their day to day work whilst social distancing (Firth et al, 2020a, 2020b). A weekly tracking survey found that 9 out of 10 charities in the UK expect that Covid-19 will have a negative impact on their ability to meet their charity objectives over the next six months; with between two fifths and one half of respondents citing the impact of social distancing on the delivery of services as the single biggest impact (Pro Bono Economics, 2020; see also Madden et al, 2020). And third, this is occurring at the same time as demand or need intensifies and becomes more complex during the crisis and as, ironically, the status, trust and legitimacy of the third sector is likely to increase (Mills et al, 2020a; 2020b).

As economies across the world have been placed in varied forms of suspended animation, states and central banks have marshalled immense resources and borrowing commitments to launch extensive economic support programmes. In the UK this involves grants, loans and tax reliefs to support affected businesses during the shutdown, expanded welfare support, and most significantly a temporary job retention scheme paying 80% of the wages of furloughed staff (HM Treasury, 2020). Similar initiatives introduced elsewhere have also made significant resources available to charities and non-profits, such as the CARES Act Paycheck Protection Program Loans scheme in the United

States, Australia's JobKeeper scheme, and the COVID-19 Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme in Ireland.

Some dedicated third sector programmes have also been announced, such as the Australian Federal Government's \$200m Community Support Package designed to support frontline charitable and community organisations where demand is increasing rapidly in response to Covid-19. The UK government's £750m support package for charities was a somewhat delayed response to gathering calls for urgent targeted intervention, led by an energetic voluntary sector campaign under the twitter slogan *#EveryDayCounts* organised by a coalition of national umbrella bodies. The package includes £370m in grants earmarked for smaller local charities (through specialist grant-making bodies such as the National Lottery Community Fund), and direct grants from central government to support the crisis work of hospices and larger national charities such as Citizens Advice and St. John's Ambulance.

Beyond governments, across the world foundations and other funding bodies have issued pledges to support the third sector (London Funders, 2020). New Covid-19 emergency funding schemes have been established and existing programmes redirected. Regulatory bodies and funders are providing flexibility in reporting requirements and issuing payments. Wealthy individuals and corporations have made sizeable donations to the overall health and community response to Coronavirus (Breeze and Ramsbottom, 2020). And large-scale fundraising drives and televised events have sought to replace income likely to be lost through the cancellation of major events in the fundraising calendar such as the London Marathon.

Working across the tension field

Across the world, some quite remarkable things have happened in the few weeks before and since lockdown measures were introduced, all of which require critical reflection and further investigation. The 'tension-field' boundaries holding the third sector between the state, community and market (Evers, 1995) seem to have become looser and more porous in the immediate crisis. For example, just in the UK:

- Nearly 3500 new Covid-19 neighbourhood-based community mutual aid groups have emerged. On platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, these provide immediate practical and emotional support for vulnerable and self-isolating individuals, share information and resources, raise funds and help to organise activities for locked down children. A fledgling national support network, Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK, has been established to provide resources for new groups, to link people with their nearest group, and to share experience across groups¹. A key question is whether and how local authorities and more established voluntary and community organisations link up with these new grassroots initiatives, and how the potential tensions between different forms of response play out.
- There was an overwhelming response to the call by government ministers for volunteers to support the work of the National Health Service (NHS). Over 750,000 people signed up in a matter of days for the Royal Voluntary Service's NHS Volunteer Responders scheme. The volunteer 'army' is being coordinated through the GoodSAM² app to collect and deliver shopping and medicines, transport supplies, drive people to and from hospital, and make regular 'check in and chat' phone calls to vulnerable self-isolating people (Royal Voluntary Service, 2020). Mobilising the scheme has proved a logistical challenge, but beyond its implementation in a context of emergency will lie questions about the appropriate role for volunteers in support of public services (McGarvey et al, 2020).
- There has been some heroic, creative and spirit-lifting fundraising efforts for charities and in support of the coronavirus response, amplified through social and traditional print and

broadcast media. This includes the astonishing '100th Birthday Walk for the NHS' by Captain Tom Moore, a war veteran who committed to walk 100 lengths of his 25m back garden before his 100th birthday. In the process he has raised over £30m for NHS Charities Together, a membership body representing, supporting and championing charities which together supply volunteers and funding to the tune of approximately £1m per day to the NHS³. This work to 'help hospitals do more' which is 'above and beyond what the NHS alone can provide' inevitably raises questions about the 'moving frontier' and balance between charitable support and public funding and provision.

Research questions for now and later

In and beyond the coronavirus crisis, how might our research agendas adapt and develop? Theoretically, the crisis draws our attention to bigger questions of continuity and change for the third sector, voluntary action and philanthropy. How should we conceptualise the multiple processes set in train by the pandemic, across politics, the economy and society? How do we seek to understand the origins and experiences of, and contested negotiations around, these complex processes of change?

For the moment we may need to put to one side theoretical approaches which are either firmly grounded in equilibrium or stability, or which struggle to account for change. Instead we may embrace, even if only temporarily, those that can more readily tell a story of the dynamic unfolding of change in conditions of uncertainty. Recent work in field theory, for example, has tried to develop the more dynamic notion of 'strategic action fields', and so move on from the idea that fields in the end merely reproduce existing power structures, despite being characterised by ongoing struggle (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Barman, 2016). In this version of field theory change arises either as a result of endogenous positional competition, or through an external shock rippling through closely entwined and interdependent strategic action fields (ibid: 19).

The Covid-19 pandemic would be seen, in this perspective at least, as a significant 'macroevent', alongside war, revolutions and military coups, or the climate emergency, which destabilises and creates a sense of generalised crisis in all fields across whole societies (ibid, 101). Other theoretical perspectives are available of course. Perhaps the coronavirus crisis is an opportunity for a wider dialogue and deeper engagement between hitherto relatively siloed perspectives covering, for example, field theory, institutional theory, systems theory and complexity theory.

This raises questions of to what extent, when, how, and in what ways will a 'new normal' for the third sector, and everything else, arise out of the current crisis, and how should we conceptualise this? And conversely, what aspects of the third sector will remain largely unaffected or revert broadly to pre-crisis terms? Within this broad framing, and merely as one indicative starting point for the conversation ahead, we can think of questions at three artificially separate but always interconnected levels: at a micro level of practices and relationships; at a meso level of organisation; and at a macro societal level.

At a *practice level*, increasingly salient questions arise over how community activists, volunteers, paid staff and board members in the third sector seek to enact their roles and try to accomplish just about anything at all in a context of social/physical distancing, restrictions on group gatherings and home-based working. This has involved a rapid escalation in the use of new technologies and conferencing platforms, at a time in any case when social media has already been transforming the ways in which people present their groups or organisations, connect with others, and mobilise a constituency of supporters. How will the ongoing use of technology reshape existing relationships between different kinds of stakeholders, for example, between paid staff and volunteers? How

might a rapid 'channel shift' away from face to face contact affect access to services, potentially creating new forms of exclusion? Alongside this, significant questions arise about the contexts, conditions and motivations underpinning mass new mobilisations of community-based mutual aid activities on the one hand, and public service supporting volunteer programmes on the other. Perhaps more importantly, we might ask how they are put into practice and whether and how they might endure or decline over time.

These questions are also relevant at a *level of organisation*. The most pressing immediate concerns would seem to be the basic survival of many existing third sector organisations, and the impact of the crisis on different types of revenue and ways of working. Qualitative longitudinal research could investigate how organisations seek to understand, shape and navigate the constraints, challenges and opportunities presented by the crisis and what follows, and how they tell their stories of responding to Covid-19. The new role of technology and home-based working may ultimately reshape some traditional models of organising in the third sector, or at least overlay new dimensions on existing assumptions about the governance and management of third sector organisations. Will a new-found interest in flexibility and informality in emergency response work continue as the immediate crisis subsides, or will more formal and managerial approaches gradually be reasserted? This kind of in-depth work could be complemented by cross-sectional and longitudinal examination of large scale third sector data sets to explore organisational survival rates, income trajectories and changing income composition. Such analyses could ascertain what kinds of organisations, in which kinds of geographical and field contexts, appear to hold up or struggle through and beyond the crisis. It is not clear what the net effect of the inevitable shake up will be on the existing structure of third sector fields, whereby niche demarcations and resource and status hierarchies between organisations may be reordered – who gains, and who loses out.

There are also a series of questions operating at a macro level of *society as a whole*. The crisis has led to different kinds of approach internationally, both to enlisting the third sector and wider civil society in 'community calls' to respond to the crisis, and in supporting the sector through it. How can we explain these variations? More specifically, what processes have led to the form and scale of different relief packages? What does this tell us about the status and position of the third sector in a given context, and its relationship with existing understandings of civil society regimes (Salamon and Anheier, 1998)? To what extent does the crisis represent a critical juncture which may shift the apparent enduring path-dependency of civil society regimes, or open the way for the creation of new pathways? The role of the third sector alongside other actors in a state of emergency, particularly the state, is a core concern for further research. In the UK, a rather antagonistic low-trust relationship has emerged over the last Conservative-led decade. How is that relationship being reconfigured nationally, and in diverse, practical ways at local level as cross-sector co-operation seeks to mobilise and coordinate emergency responses? To what extent will 'all-hands-on-deck' attitudes become embedded in new modes of partnership and collaboration? And what might be the role for civil society and voluntary action if/as the wider 'all-in-this-together' sentiment becomes complicated by resurfacing reminders of deep inequalities and social divisions?

This last question points towards new appreciation of the cultural dimension of the third sector's work and role, focusing on the contested ways in which it comes to be represented and symbolised, but also its broader generative role in culture and society. Alexander (2019) has developed the concept of 'civil repair' to describe the efforts across society to mend otherwise torn social fabrics and broken solidarities. Third sector responses to Covid-19 in all their variety can be seen as a case in point. More broadly, however, we should recognise that the third sector can sometimes play a prefigurative and imaginative role in offering new ideas, approaches and visions.

At first glance there seems to be a lot of hopeful commentary about how things cannot or will not be the same again, with societies taking a more progressive turn. This rightly recognises the crisis as a window of opportunity, but at the same time perhaps overlooks the fact that work is always underway by individual and collective actors both to stabilise and to disrupt existing configurations of power, position and understanding. It is an open question how the balance of forces plays out, and, within this, where the third sector sits. The coronavirus crisis may be creating the conditions for a new and comprehensive social contract, akin to the social and economic reconstruction in the aftermath of the Second World War. What roles might the third sector and civil society play in advancing, but also in some cases resisting this process?

We might be confined temporarily in various forms of restriction and lockdown. Yet as critically enquiring scholars and researchers, we should never suspend our curiosity and forget to ask questions – about emerging developments, and about what lies ahead for a seemingly embattled and bruised third sector in a period of uncertain and faltering recovery. We may be forced into social distancing, implored to stay at home, our spirits kept up by small acts of kindness, communal appreciation of key workers, and rainbow images in windows or chalked on footpaths. But what lies over the rainbow? It is a perilous world out there and yet endlessly fascinating. As we endure this, we should endeavour to stay safe - and look out.

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Endnotes

¹ Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK: Local organising to support the most vulnerable in our communities, <https://covidmutualaid.org/>. The website has an interactive map showing registered local groups, identifying some 3,465 separate groups as of 27-4-20.

² 'GoodSAM' is an alert and dispatch platform for medical responders in emergencies. SAM stands for 'Smartphone Activated Medics' <https://www.goodsamapp.org/home>, accessed 27-4-20.

³ NHS Charities Together, <https://www.nhscharitiestogether.co.uk/what-we-do/>, accessed 27-4-20; see also <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/tomswalkforthenhs>, indicating a steadily rising total for the 100th Birthday Walk which had reached £32,796,540 by 18-5-20.