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Review article

Re-making state-civil society relationships during the COVID 19 pandemic? An English perspective

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Abstract

State and civil society have had a complicated and inter-twined relationship for many years and this has arguably never been more evident than during the COVID 19 pandemic. This review article discusses how this relationship played out locally and nationally during the early months of the pandemic from an English perspective to consider whether we have witnessed an extension of pre-existing roles or a re-making of new ones. At a national level we identify the exacerbation of pre-existing *adversarial* relationships focussed on the scale and necessity of the government's financial support package for civil society organisations (CSOs). At the local level we observe an extension of prior *complementary* relationships, with CSOs further embedded in local systems of decision making, co-ordination and service provision. We also identify a newly visible and increasingly *complementary* local role for previously *supplementary* community-led CSOs responding to the needs of vulnerable citizens. It is unclear if the next phase of the pandemic will affect these relationships yet further, or whether these configurations will be preserved following the COVID-19 crisis, but it seems certain that the crisis will have a lasting effect on national and local state-civil society interactions in one way or another.

Keywords: Civil society organisations; COVID 19; national government; local government; communities.

Introduction

Civil society organisations (CSOs) - which include charities, voluntary organisations, community and mutual aid groups, social enterprises, and other social purpose organisations; and operate at local, national and international scales – have a long and complicated relationship with the state (both local and national government). In recent times this has never been more evident than during the COVID 19 pandemic during which CSOs have been engaged in a range of high-profile activities. From hyper-local neighbour-led mutual aid groups and spontaneous volunteers finding new ways to support vulnerable local people, often filling voids in statutory provision, to national charities campaigning on behalf of at-risk and marginalised groups, CSOs have been at the forefront of the crisis response.

Scholars interested in understanding the complexities of state-civil society relationships tend to turn to economic theories in their search for explanations. Young (2000) in particular has been influential by bringing different strands of theory together to identify three alternative propositions, which are that CSOs (a) operate independently as supplements to government, (b) work as complements to government in a partnership relationship, or (c) are engaged in an adversarial relationship of mutual accountability. In the *supplementary model*, CSOs are viewed as fulfilling the demand for public goods left unsatisfied by state provision by providing collective goods on a voluntary basis (Weisbrod, 1977). In the *complementary model*, CSOs are contracted to provide public goods and services largely financed through state budgets (Salamon, 1995). In the *adversarial model*, CSOs lobby the state on behalf of vulnerable groups, for changes to public policy and to ensure state actions are in the public interest (Weisbrod, 1977). Young (2000) acknowledged that the three models were not mutually exclusive as different organisations can perform multiple, often shifting roles over time. Nonetheless, when understood as archetypes, these three models provide a useful frame through which to explore the nature of state-civil society profit relationships in light of significant 'macroevents.'

'Macroevents' - moments of significant economic and social upheaval, such as the COVID 19 pandemic - represent external shocks or moments of 'unsettlement' through which developments in one field of activity (in this case a global public health crisis) rapidly cascade through other fields including politics, public services and civil society (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Macmillan *et al.*, 2013). Thus, episodes such as the COVID 19 pandemic which destabilise, disrupt and create a sense of crisis, force actors in different overlapping fields - politics, public services, civil society, and communities - to rapidly make sense of what is changing and develop new ways of responding and relating to each other (Macmillan, 2020a). In this context, as with other moments of 'unsettlement' such as the 2008 economic crisis (Macmillan *et al.*, 2013), it is appropriate to consider the implications for state-civil society relationships: to what extent are we witnessing an extension of relationships that preceded the crisis; and to what extent are these relationships being re-made out of a necessity to 'do things differently'?

This article aims to provide some answers to these questions in the English context. Drawing on a review of documentary material produced by key state and CSOs actors and emerging findings from several empirical studies currently exploring local state-CSOs crisis responses in real-time, we explore the state-CSOs relationships at two levels of governance: national and local. For each level, we review the nature of state-CSOs relationships prior to the COVID-19 pandemic before discussing how these have evolved during the immediate pandemic response. Our discussion is necessarily high-level and emergent given the early status of our research and the uncertain trajectory of the pandemic. There will inevitably also have been variations in how individual CSOs have related to government during the pandemic and in the roles they have played in different localities. This point notwithstanding, we conclude with some reflections for future research within the field of CSOs studies both during and beyond the crisis.

State-CSO relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic

National government

In England national government relationships are often formed with large charities. These include charities delivering components of national public services such as criminal justice and probation (for example NACRO); charities campaigning on causes

such a poverty alleviation (for example The Trussell Trust) or homelessness (for example Shelter); and umbrella bodies representing the collective interests of CSOs organisations (for example NCVO – the National Council of Voluntary Organisations). During the 10-year period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic these large CSOs generally experienced a worsening of their relationship with national government which has been characterised as one of increasingly ‘antagonistic collaboration’ (Macmillan and Ellis-Paine, 2020). National charities delivering public services routinely fulfilled a complementary function, delivering in support of government public policy priorities such as probation, but they often found themselves caught in contractual wrangles and debates about payments-for-results and what constituted effective delivery (Rees *et al.*, 2017). By contrast, national campaigning charities played an increasingly adversarial role, highlighting the negative consequences of government welfare reform and austerity measures on social justice issues such as food poverty (Lambie-Mumford, 2017). National umbrella bodies tended to take a more nuanced approach, fulfilling a complementary role in some cases, for example by brokering CSOs organisations’ involvement in policy development, but engaging in more adversarial activity when necessary (for example in response to government efforts to restrict charities’ campaigning role).

Thus, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic the relationship between national government and civil society was on shakier ground than, for example, the start of the 2008 financial crisis, when the preceding years had been characterised by increasing partnership, albeit usually with the government in the more dominant role (Carmel and Harlock, 2008). Given this context it is perhaps not surprising that the period since the pandemic took hold in March 2020 has been characterised by further and more entrenched adversarial relations at a national level. Central to this has been the social media campaign *#NeverMoreNeeded* led by national charities of different types to raise awareness the work of CSOs in responding to the pandemic, and to highlight their financial precarity due to a sudden drop-off in income from fundraising, donations and fees for goods and services. Initial estimates by NCVO suggested that civil society would lose £4bn of income during the first 12 weeks of the pandemic (House of Commons, 2020) but the national government was slow to respond to calls for intervention. Eventually, it announced a £750m ‘rescue package’, including £370m in grants for CSOs responding to needs at a local level and support for larger charities facing cashflow problems that were limiting the sustainability of their crisis support (Macmillan, 2020b). This included targeted support for CSOs providing activity in fields that were in theory supplementary to the state, but in practice where the Government was likely to be held accountable for ensuring ongoing delivery. These included hospices, charities supporting vulnerable groups such as victims of domestic abuse, food charity and legal advice. Although the scale of resources being directed at civil society is unprecedented the sector itself has argued that the support provided is insufficient, particularly when compared with the more than £100 billion already committed to support the wider economy (Emmerson and Stockton, 2020; Macmillan and Ellis-Paine, 2020).

This increasingly adversarial relationship between the state and the non-profit sector during the COVID-19 pandemic raises questions about whether and how relationships change will as the immediate crisis subsides, and government priorities move toward supporting economic and social recovery. Charities have already taken to social media to call for the government to commit to a plan to *#BuildBackBetter* by embedding the principles of civic and democratic renewal at the heart of their recovery programme. This may suggest that for many larger national-level CSOs the adversarial mode will continue for some time to come. But charities also serve a range of complementary, supplementary and symbolic purposes for national government in England, so they may take additional actions to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic for complementary and supplementary CSOs in due course. The ‘Kruger Review’ (Kruger, 2020), undertaken by Danny Kruger MP at the request of the Prime Minister, offers warm words about a new

'social covenant' through which power may be shared more evenly between communities and government, but provides little in the way of substantive policy commitments or investment that will benefit CSOs in the short term.

Local government

In England the majority of public welfare, health and social care services are delivered through local (i.e. municipal) government and by local components of the National Health Service (NHS). More than half (52 per cent) of CSOs in England are small and locally based (Dayson et al, 2018) and therefore have their main state relationships with local government and NHS. The 10-year period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was characterised by an increasingly complementary relationship between many locally based CSOs and local government, albeit with varying levels of interdependence (Buckingham, 2012). This was precipitated by moves toward public service commissioning, through which public sector bodies increasingly manage their relationships with non-state providers via outsourcing, competitive tendering and contracting (Rees and Mullins, 2016).

This complementary relationship between locally based CSOs and local government has arguably been further embedded since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although most CSOs providers have been unable to provide contracted services 'as usual', many have rapidly altered their provision to meet the immediate and basic needs of local people. A particular focus has been on supporting those vulnerable people required to 'shield' (i.e. cease all face-to-face contact with other people) during the 'lockdown'. Existing and new service users have been supported by CSOs through the provision of food, medicines and other essential items, as well as efforts to retain some degree of social contact through telephone calls and socially distanced visits. In many areas these activities have been formally embedded in local government support structures, including many community-based CSOs being asked to act as local 'hubs' for the co-ordination of essential services and volunteers.

A key driver of this embeddedness of CSOs in the local government response has been the pre-existence of socially embedded trusting relationships between the leaders of local CSOs and local government officials in some areas. These relationships have enabled CSOs to respond flexibly to need as it has emerged at a hyper-local level without concern for the strictures of existing service contracts that define the scope of their work. For local CSOs embedded in these formal structures the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to reframe their relationship with the state once the immediate crisis has subsided. In particular, there is hope that it will precipitate a shift away from transactional commissioning models to a more collaborative model of local public service delivery where accountability is shared more equally between CSOs and the state.

Although there is no formal neighbourhood government in England local public services are increasingly implemented at this level through local government and NHS mechanisms. England, like most other countries in Europe and North America, also has a long tradition of community-led organisations and mutual aid groups that operate at the neighbourhood level (Springer, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic many of these CSOs operated 'below the radar' of and were largely invisible to local and national government (Soteri-Proctor and Alcock, 2012). Their activities, which served to improve community cohesion and build social capital (Putnam, 2000), were largely separate from and supplementary to state provision.

The scale and reach of these neighbourhood level CSOs have increased markedly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that around 3,800 new mutual aid groups have formed in England since the start of the crisis¹ and neighbourhood level organisations have played a central role in the co-ordination and provision of support. Although these efforts may have initially been supplementary to local government activities many quickly became embedded in and complementary to formal provision for vulnerable people and as a source of information about needs within communities.

These neighbourhood-based organisations and groups – some formally constituted and organised and some very informal – are now far more visible to their communities and local government officials than was previously the case. This visibility brings benefits, in terms of reach and additional resources. But it also brings risks of control from government which it has been argued can ‘discipline’ associational activities, limit the scope for social change and render previously independent and autonomous CSOs activities a ‘governable terrain’ (Carmel and Harlock, 2008; Nickel and Eikenberry, 2016). It remains to be seen what role neighbourhood-based CSOs play during the recovery from the pandemic, in particular whether they remain embedded in and complementary to state functions, or whether they return to their previously independent and semi-visible supplementary role.

When it comes to state-CSOs relationships during the forthcoming ‘recovery’ from the pandemic national and local CSOs may face a choice about the role they play. Do they want to be further co-opted by the state or should they resist further state control? It may be, however, that their role is ultimately determined by government policy and resource allocation priorities. Will national and local government heed calls to *#BuildBackBetter* through a process of civic and democratic renewal and deeper state-CSOs co-operation, or will they take a centralised approach in which the role of CSOs may primarily be to hold government to account? The Kruger Review (2020) provides some hope in this regard, for it recognises that need for “ties that bind people and communities together, not just to protect us against coronavirus but to help us rebuild our communities and the country” (p10), and that a decade of austerity has led to the “depletion of the amenities and services that helped hold them together” (p11). However, despite making a range of recommendations for how this may be achieved – through a redistribution of power, promoting volunteering and social action, and by ‘levelling-up’ so-called ‘left-behind’ areas through investment in communities and social infrastructure – the extent to which these will be taken forward by government is unclear, as is the scale of investment that may be set aside to achieve these goals.

Conclusion

This review article has explored national and local state-CSOs relationships prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic from an English perspective in order to consider the extent to which they represent an extension of pre-existing roles or a re-making of new ones. The distinction between national and local state-CSOs relationships, and further exploration of the role of neighbourhood level CSOs, is important for, as the discussion in this article have demonstrated, there may have been significant variations in the nature and purpose of state-CSOs relationships at these different levels of governance during the pandemic. Our findings suggest that rather than relationships being re-made, what we have witnessed is an acceleration of pre-existing trends.

At a national level state-CSOs relationships have been characterised by increasingly adversarial ‘antagonistic collaboration’ (Macmillan and Ellis-Paine, 2020), focussed on the scale and necessity of the government’s financial support package for civil society organisations (CSOs). At the local level there has been an extension of prior

complementary relationships, with CSOs further embedded in local systems of decision making, co-ordination and service provision in areas where this was happening already. There has also been a newly visible and increasingly complementary local role for previously supplementary community-led CSOs responding to the needs of vulnerable citizens. It is at this lowest tier that the greatest potential for a longer-term remaking of state-civil society relationships exists but whether this would of benefit to small local CSOs and the communities they serve requires further discussion and debate. Co-opting these CSOs into an unbalanced relationship with the state presents risks for their associational activities and community accountability and may limit their potential as agents for social change (Carmel and Harlock, 2008; Nickel and Eikenberry, 2016).

It may be that the COVID pandemic serves to reignite policy debates about the relationship between CSOs and the state in England following the 'post-Big Society' period (2015-19) which was something of a policy vacuum in this regard. The 2018 Civil Society Strategy presented little in the way of new funding or major policies and in some ways sought to dilute the notion of a sector distinct from government and private business (Bennett *et al.*, 2019), whilst a clear vision for the future of civil society was absent from the 2019 General Election Manifestos of both main Westminster parties (Damm and Dayson, 2019). Certainly the Kruger Review (2020) implies a renewed focus from central government, on civil society specifically and 'communities' in a more general sense, and suggests that the state may wish to rebuild (national) and build-on (local) these relationships in its response to the pandemic. However, it has offered little in the way of concrete policy proposals or investment strategies through which this vision may be realised, and a critical reading of the Review may lead one to conclude that a further dilution of the boundaries between the state, civil society and the private sector is what is actually being proposed.

Our findings also provide some pointers for future research within CSOs studies. Although these are informed by the English context, they ought to resonate internationally in jurisdictions characterised by ever closer alignment between civil society and the state. Empirically, the main questions to emerge from this article relate to the future for national and local CSOs organisations in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking to the immediate future, how will different levels of government approach the 'recovery' from the pandemic and what role will CSOs be expected or invited to play? If they are not directly involved, what will their alternative role be, and will they be able hold government to account? Looking further forward, will a 'new normal' for state-CSOs relationships arise out of the crisis, what will it look like, how will it vary for different types of CSOs and how should it be conceptualised (see also Macmillan, 2020b)? The COVID-19 pandemic provides a disjuncture through which to draw further theoretical insights into the nature of state-CSOs relationships and the extent to which they change or remain static during times of crisis. Whilst Young's (2000) framework applied provides a helpful start point for this we may need to turn to other theoretical perspectives to develop our understanding yet further.

Notes

¹ See the [COVID-19 Mutual Aid website](#). The website has an interactive map showing registered local groups. There were 3,792 separate groups in England and Wales as of 8 July 2020.

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