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**Understanding the distinctiveness of small scale,  
third sector activity: the role of local knowledge  
and networks in shaping below the radar actions**

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# Understanding the distinctiveness of small scale, third sector activity: the role of local knowledge and networks in shaping below the radar actions

## Abstract

'Below the radar' has become a short-hand term for small community groups who are either not registered with the Charity Commission or other regulatory bodies and or are registered but lack a regular, substantial annual income. Much of the existing research into the Third Sector has focused on formal, larger, organisations leaving gaps in the knowledge base around the nature and function of small groups and more informal activities which happen at a community level.

The following working paper is based on interviews with representatives from national community sector organisations, development agencies, members of policy fora and academics with a background in community based research. It explores the scale, scope and functions of 'below the radar' activity in the Third Sector, why people become active within their community and the factors which both help and hinder community based action. Finally the paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of 'below the radar' action, issues of accountability and asks the question – are their features that make more informal community organisation and activity distinctive.

## Keywords

Below the radar, community, community sector, community groups and activities, sustainability and accountability.

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## Introduction

The expression 'below, or under, the radar' (BTR) has become a short-hand term used to describe small voluntary organisations, community groups and more informal or semi-formal activities in the Third Sector. Interest in such activities, beyond the role of the formal voluntary sector in service delivery, has grown in recent times. It cuts across a wide range of policy concerns: from the engagement of Black and Minority Ethnic community organisations in community cohesion agendas and combating extremism, through to the commissioning of public services at the local level, supporting grass roots community economic development in excluded neighbourhoods, as well as the involvement of community based organisations in modernising local government, community safety and health planning and policy. This interest has coincided with a series of investments in small organisations to develop their capacity to engage in policy and service delivery agendas including, for example, Community Empowerment Networks and, subsequently, Regional Empowerment Partnerships as well capacity building funds focussing specifically on faith and refugee groups.

The literature review and definitions papers completed for the BTR work stream (Phillimore *et al.* 2009; McCabe and Phillimore 2010) revealed a wide range of gaps in knowledge about this part of the Third Sector. Whilst the term 'below the radar' was being increasingly used in policy circles, opinion was divided. For some, BTR activities and organisations were restricted to those which were not registered with the Charity Commission, Companies House or other regulatory bodies, or on key national databases. Others noted that small, financially insecure, but registered, organisations might also be viewed as BTR. The literature review on small and/or unregistered community and voluntary sector activity indicated that this part of the third sector had received a scant research attention compared to the 'mainstream', service delivery, voluntary organisations. What research there was tended to focus upon the challenges and problems faced by the sector. Much rhetoric and anecdote has been evident about the role, function and strengths of small voluntary and community based activity. Substantial claims have been made about the importance of community groups and action (for example CLG, 2009), but there was limited empirically based evidence about the impact of BTR actions upon society, how they evolve over time and who becomes active in them.

Furthermore academic and policy focus on 'sub-groupings' (e.g. rural/BME/faith organisations) resulted in a number of claims regarding the unique features of particular parts of the sector. Arguments have been made that the BME sector, although this term is seen as contentious, (McLeod *et al.* 2001), and faith sector (Furbey *et al.* 2006) have different characteristics to the mainstream sector. Rural community groups have also been viewed as qualitatively different to their urban counterparts (Abram *et al.* 1996). The extent to which there are commonalities, or overlaps, between, for instance, faith based and BME groups remain largely unexplored. This, in turn, raises the issue of other gaps in the literature on below the radar activities and small community based groups. Little, for instance, appears to have been written on the influences of class or gender (Dominelli; 2006) in community and voluntary action.

## Methods

In response to the gaps in knowledge about the BTR sector as a whole, as well as its constituent parts, the BTR team at the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) sought to undertake 'overview' interviews with network organisations and individuals with expertise about small scale voluntary and community activity. The overall aim of the interviews was to explore the nature of the BTR sector. Key research objectives included:

- exploring the usefulness of the term BTR in describing this part of the sector;
- examining the role and function of this part of the Third Sector;
- seeking to identify the extent to which BTR activity is perceived as distinctive from larger, highly formal, parts of the sector;
- identifying commonalities and differences across, and between, different 'sub-sectors' of activity
- exploring the levels and types of support required by community groups.

For ease of communication the terms below the radar activity, organisations, and actions are used interchangeably to denote any type of small scale voluntary, community or social enterprise action. While this paper has been written predominantly using the term BTR to discuss these small scale actions, no assumptions have been made about the value or usefulness of the phrase, and as thus it should be considered a shorthand term for the wide range of actions that occur at a small scale.

The research team at the TSRC drafted a list of organisations and individuals known to be active either as researchers, policymakers or practitioners, in the field. A degree of snow-balling was undertaken as some respondents were asked to recommend others for interview. In total 29 individuals were interviewed from 27 different organisations. Details of interviewees are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Background or expertise of interviewees

Migrant and refugee community	5
Rural	5
Development agency	4
Generic umbrella/membership organisations	4
Black and minority ethnic focus	4
Statutory/governmental policy	3
Faith	2
Arts	1
Gender	1
Total	29

Once the interviewee list was constructed potential respondents were contacted by e-mail to request an interview. All respondents agreed to take part and interviews took place between June and November 2009. Interviews took between 45 minutes and two hours. All interviews were recorded. Eight interviews were transcribed in full, with detailed notes, including verbatim quotes, taken from the others.

This paper presents the findings of those interviews. There are, inevitably, gaps in the sample base which will be addressed as the BTR work stream's research evolves. For example, no representatives of national single-faith networks were contacted and specific regional perspectives (e.g. Community Empowerment Partnerships) are not included. Further, whilst the data was analysed using a systematic thematic approach, the views of research participants are offered without critical comment. The data might be described, therefore, as the sector's 'narrative about itself' and, as such, represents a set of views and reflections that may be confirmed, questioned or even challenged, as the Third Sector Research Centre's longitudinal research with small, BTR, community groups, and other research programmes evolve.

### 'Below the radar' as a descriptive term

All but one respondent, whose specialism was rural communities, had heard the term 'below the radar' used in relation to the Third Sector, although three of the respondents had only heard it used by the TSRC. Of those who responded this question six respondents did not know where they had heard the term but knew it was '*out there*', the highest number of respondents (9) considered it very much a policy term emerging both from national and local government. Amongst other respondents one BME organisation commonly used the term themselves, and a development agency had seen the term used in Third Sector literature.

When asked the meaning of the term, there were two main interpretations. Most common was groups or activities that operated outside of '*the system*' namely, not registered with the Charity Commission, on any national database, or excluded from policy discussions. Some respondents felt that BTR activities were '*hidden from view*' because '*they don't tell me anything about themselves and they don't tell anyone else much*' (umbrella organisation), largely because they were self-sufficient and had no reason to go 'on the radar'. Others argued that being below the radar was indicative of a failure of the state to be aware of small scale activity '*as they represent too much of a challenge for organisations in terms of having to do systematic outreach*' (academic with BME specialism).

Other respondents posed the question '*whose radar?*' pointing out that any interpretation of the term would depend on who was looking and thus there were likely to be many different definitions of the term. When we explored '*whose radar?*' the main responses were government and policymakers. A Migrant and Refugee Community Organisations (MRCO) respondent argued that there was a fault with the radar '*not sending out the right beams*', while a faith and development agency respondent argued that the state was below the radar because it was not in touch with local knowledge and local people. Small groups on the other hand were argued to be 'on the radar' where it mattered, within their communities. Additional radars suggested included financial (arts and faith), media (umbrella) or service provider (MRCO) radars

One MRCO respondent argued the term was useful *'it does say something that is a truth. There's a whole mess of vibrant life going on that's not recognised'*. One BME, and the arts respondent said they found the term useful in order to communicate with policymakers, and a development agency respondent said there was no better term currently in usage:

*'Below the Radar is a useful phrase, but has its limits. It may be useful in terms of political and infra-structure agendas – developing support and recognition (for the sector/organisations). But it is not a phrase that (small) groups themselves would recognise – or maybe even government which works with the 'tip of the iceberg' voluntary sector'* (membership organisation perspective).

However, the majority found BTR to be so open to multiple interpretations that the term became meaningless. Some found it particularly *'unhelpful as it presented a deficit model'* which implied that community activity remained 'below the radar' because groups lacked the capacity to grow and develop. Three respondents found the term actually disempowering, because of that implied failure on the part of activities or groups; *'they are not below the radar but the heart and soul of the sector'* (development agency).

Respondents were asked to suggest alternatives that they used on a regular basis. Three respondents used *'hard to reach'* (BME and MRCO), the gender respondent used small groups. One BME respondent used *'grassroots'* and another used *'social organising'*. The statutory and development agency respondents used *'community sector'*, *'civil society organisation'* or *'volunteer led'*.

## The importance of BTR

Most respondents saw the BTR sector as being an important response to needs that were currently unmet either due to lack of resources, or the failure of the state and other agencies to identify or address need. BME respondents felt that group formation was seen as important because the state favoured community based action as a solution to lack of resources and as a *'cheaper option'* in tackling social problems *'we have lost our way as a society and are looking at (community) organisations as salvation'* (BME respondent). Rural respondents commented that community groups were increasingly *'filling the gaps left when statutory services withdraw from (rural) areas'*. Statutory respondents argued the sector was *'vital'* and *'crucial'* because of its wide reach, responsiveness to emerging problems, flexibility and innovative nature. An MRCO respondent thought small groups *'reach the places the system can't get'*:

*'What we know about these groups in terms of formal lists actually bears no resemblance to the levels of activity within groups. There tends to be the groups everyone knows about and then invisible groups. Its those invisible groups that (names area) were perhaps the most active in their community – but were unknown beyond it.'* (network organisation perspective).

A common theme, across different stakeholders, was the crucial importance of BTR groups and activities in *'bringing isolated people and communities together'*, *'connecting people'* and *'overcoming isolation'*. In short such groups were acting as *'the social glue'*,

## The function of below the radar organisations and activities

Respondents from the nine thematic areas outlined in Table 1, agreed that the function of BTR activities and groups was extremely broad, often holistic, and hard to quantify '*how long is a piece of string.....as diverse as people's interests*' (development agency). MRCO, gender, and, to a lesser extent, rural respondents, were keen to stress that often the activities offered by BTR groups were available nowhere else, for example advice given to new migrants about how the health service worked given in their mother tongue. Respondents were also keen to acknowledge that, with the possible exceptions of the arts and sports groups, activities were often a response to immediate need and/or particular vulnerability for example social isolation amongst the elderly.

Activities could be categorised in a number of ways:

- focusing on social justice and giving voice through advocacy, representing, campaigning and lobbying;
- taking a specific emphasis on a particular issue or problem that may be time limited or very local in nature for example a traffic problem (umbrella organisation). For organisations working with new communities activities could be relatively short-lived meeting the needs of new arrivals until they became settled;
- filling gaps in state provision through mutual aid or support to those in need. For MRCOs this might mean providing support to those who are not entitled to access state benefits. For others this often meant working with vulnerable people with multiple needs who could not be supported holistically by the state. The respondent focusing on women's issues argued that the needs of some women were not widely understood or provided for except by the women's movement;
- providing social networks and reducing isolation through providing a safe social space. Sometimes groups formed the '*social glue*' to bring people from a wide range of backgrounds together. This type of activity could be associated with faith inspired actions;
- celebrating or maintaining cultural identity. While this type of activity was particularly important in BME and migrant and refugee communities, respondents from the arts, umbrella and rural sectors also saw celebration as an important function;
- providing sports, arts and entertainment activities. From social events such as bingo based at community hubs to venue hire that enabled the provision of space for specialist activities and arts based activities, the majority of '*entertainment and leisure*' activities that communities enjoyed were said to be provided by communities for their communities.

## The scale of BTR action

There was agreement across the sectors that BTR activity was more significant in extent and scale than registered actions:

*'The majority of the sector is small unregistered community associations and then I get concerned about looking through the telescope the wrong way round, which is how the sector is perceived by government, which is that the focus is on the kind of organisations*



*that they can understand and because they have statutory structures like a council for voluntary service’.*

Some, such as the faith and umbrella respondents, felt it was impossible to even estimate numbers, and used the analogy of ‘an iceberg’:

*‘I describe the totality of the voluntary sector as an ice-berg...it’s just trying to get across the idea that most of the community organisations are below the water as in an ice-berg and that has profound implications on how that sector is seen and understood and in terms of relationships of power as well, you can have quite a skewed picture – because the bit below the water is not recognised in terms of voice, in terms of policy or even research proposals’.*

Estimates from others varied but reinforced the view that the BTR part of the third sector far exceeded the registered part. Rural respondents noted:

*‘it is important to stress that most rural groups would be ‘below the radar’. They are small and operate at a very local/parish level. It is estimated that there are between 8-9,000 village hall associations in England and below this there are maybe 10-15 groups using village halls. These will be almost invisible’.*

One development agency interview, talking of environmental work, noted:

*‘in my previous job we had a network of about 3,000 sort of park, green space groups all of whom were volunteer led, that’s in just one very very small sector. I would estimate 80% were unregistered’.*

At local level participants estimated that there were:

- 1800 to 3000 unregistered BME groups in Birmingham;
- 100 BME groups in York, of which only 3 are registered;

Nationally, there were thought to be:

- 8-9000 village hall associations in England each with 10-15 user groups;
- 50,000 voluntary arts groups in England and 190 umbrella bodies;
- 80% of organisations unregistered;
- 600,000 unregistered organisations;
- one in three third sector organisations registered;
- one million informal organisations.

It is, however, unclear whether these national estimates are based on ‘folk wisdom’ within the sector, or interviewees familiarity with the National Council of Voluntary Organisations Almanac data (NCVO: 2009).

Specialist respondents found categorising their parts of the BTR sector into further discreet or quantifiable sub-sectors difficult because the sector constantly evolved in response to social and economic situations. However the arts respondent identified a divide between urban and rural arts, with the folk arts more dominant in the latter, and one of the MRCO respondents was able to divide RCOs into different categories including political groups, faith based groups, cultural societies, advice and welfare groups and Diaspora development organisations.

## Coming into existence

BME respondents argued that activities most often commenced when gaps in services were identified, often because of the state's failure to meet the needs of marginalised groups. Similarly MRCOs talked about actions occurring to provide mutual aid to new arrivals, who were unable to locate that support elsewhere. One respondent described the cultural expectation that he would provide support to *'friends I didn't know....you have to open your door to those in need'*. Sometimes people who were isolated came together. People also combined efforts where there was a common interest. Alternatively rural respondents described how actions often occurred as a response to a situation that needed changing, or a particular problem, for example the community coming together to develop a community shop following the closure of the local shop. Development agencies believed that action was most likely to happen where there was a rich investment in community development. Actions could also evolve in response to an area based regeneration initiative. Occasionally actions occurred because people had seen them happen elsewhere and had decided to try something themselves.

Action proliferated where there were no alternatives *'when you have no money, no food or you just have to do something'* (women's respondent). Faith and MRCO respondents talked about a *'crucible'* for action. This could be location within an area that has a history of making things happen, which is accepting of risk taking, or it might be the early stages of migrant arrival in inner city areas. Here new arrivals were said to create life and energy. Active citizens reproduced the vibrancy from their home communities that was lacking in modern day urban areas and provided a stimulus for others *'we may as well do it too'*. Actions also proliferated where there was suitable premises to provide a base for action and organising:

*'where there is a 'crucible'; - places with long history of welcoming and bringing people together – around existing institutions that are accepting of risk taking – place to be welcome and not expecting formality, easy going, see what develops, tolerance of low level risks' (woman respondent).*

A common enemy, whether that was desperation or poverty, or challenging a development proposal, was also seen as a powerful motivator for activity. Shared anger could be powerful. However a number of respondents pointed out that much – if not most – community based activity had a social function *'people are group animals and naturally want to come together.'*

## People involved in BTR activity

Respondents suggested there may be a 'type' of person who was most likely to be involved in BTR activity. There was some agreement that women were most likely to start a small scale activity *'although the higher up the hierarchy you go its men'* (faith respondent). In rural areas newcomers were said to be most likely to be active, but that this could sometimes cause difficulties because they had a different vision of the 'rural idyll', to the locally born population. MRCO, BME and faith respondents said that faith could be a stimulus to bring people together. Most important across the

sectors was the personality of leaders. They were often passionate, charismatic, self-motivated and skilled. A rural respondent argued that a 'gobby activist' was important:

*'challenging local activist tenants can be the difference – because they heat up the temperature so that it's controversial, people respond to a bit of controversy and conflict and then you can grow something with that.'*

On the one hand they could mobilise people around a particular issue, but on the other, their drive and sense of certainty in responding to that issue could be off putting. Arts and gender respondents argued that like-mindedness was important whilst acknowledging that this could suggest that groups become intentionally or unintentionally exclusive:

*'Who participates? Well there is an issue of inclusivity. (Arts) groups can appear to be exclusive because they come together around a shared interest – so obviously they become groups of like minded people...There is an issue of insularity in lots of small groups. This may not be deliberate but they can create accidental barriers which exclude others.'*

The women respondent thought that many women's groups were run by people who had experienced oppression for themselves and were keen to help make changes for others. MRCO respondents also talked about people having survived a particular situation and wanting to 'put something back' by helping people who were going through a similar situation.

## Distinctiveness

There was agreement that BTR activities operated in a distinctive fashion and worked in a markedly different way to the more mainstream third sector. Themes which emerged included:

- that there were blurred boundaries between the personal and civic lives of actors and activists *'It's completely their life...they never clock off'* (development agency);
- some groups were self funded and accessed resources from within their communities. For example the Sudanese community combined limited resources to cover the costs of a flight home for a community member who was struggling to survive in the UK;
- many activities are social action based. BTR activists take risks that 'professional' organisations would not consider. They are not tied to any specific ways of working by funding contracts and are free to lobby as they see fit;
- they are driven by political, social, cultural or faith values;
- they may seem to have a single focus but fulfil multiple roles at a community level:

*'I'm thinking of another sports club we looked at, was I guess their main activity was providing boxing activities and things like that but they provided general social activities for people – sort of an opportunity to get -together, running all sorts of events, activities to clean up and tidy the venue. I guess they had the sort of common purpose – they were about providing that main activity but all the other activities that contributed to that were incredibly diverse, which then meant that people could come along and dip in however they chose and saw fit really because they do provide quite a broad social function within society at local level'. (development agency perspective);*

- they are embedded within their communities, are connected and can reach people working in a highly localised way with specialised local or community of interest knowledge : *'Small organisations are the closest to community – they can alert policy makers to issues before they become problem 'you know issue is coming';*
- they often have experiential knowledge, are led by communities for communities, with sufficient trust and respect to be able to address the most sensitive of issues including child abuse and domestic violence;
- they address specific needs for specific groups that the mainstream does not see or does not acknowledge' (network organisation) and
- deal with needs in a holistic way. Women's, BME and new community organisations were argued to offer support and solutions to complex needs in a totally different manner to state institutions;
- they are more fluid, flexible and informal than the mainstream. Without a formal structure and constitution they can adapt to needs as they emerge. *'They are uninhibited by bureaucracy, able to act immediately without the need for formalised meetings – as a result the rules are different [and] not mediated by money exchange'.* (woman respondent). Other representatives from national network organisations also noted the lack of formal structures as a potential strength, whilst adding a note of caution: *'if you are below the radar and there is no-one on the outside looking in how do you know what you are doing is okay? Where are the 'checks and balances' in small, fairly informal, groups?'*
- they can be run by volunteers working collectively or by driven, sometimes autocratic individuals. Further the concept of a 'volunteer' differed from that in highly structured voluntary organisations:

*'volunteer-management within these groups is very informal, very active, responds to what people want, little chats- it doesn't have the levels of bureaucracy that a lot of formal volunteering seems to have and people felt quite strongly when we talked to them that if a formal volunteer management system was imposed upon these sorts of groups it would kill those groups.'*

- they work on instinct, responding to problems rapidly often without strategic or longer term plans;
- they can be inward looking, insular and exclusive rather than inclusive;
- they may choose to be 'under the radar' because they wish to avoid attention for cultural or political reasons;
- a consistent theme from across interviews was the perceived difference between community based activity and larger, professionalised organisations within the third sector:

*'What the sector is about is social justice, that is what it is about, but actually I think a lot of the sector has forgotten that in a meaningful way; I think everyone can sign up to it in a superficial way in terms of values and mission statements and shiny documents... but I'm not sure that a lot of the professionalised voluntary sector is about a direct engagement with people that changes their lives and accords to principles of social justice, I think it's*

*about getting some money that provides some services that may or may not impact on people's lives in a hopefully social just way – it's a lot more distanced'*

- for BME respondents:

*'All organisations start with a passion – big organisations often lose sight of values – it's easier to hold out for your values when unfunded – you do what you want to do. So there is a lack of [having to] compromise'.*

## Resources

BTR activity harnessed a wide range of resources in order to thrive or survive. A key resource mentioned by all respondents was that of time and expertise. It was clear that volunteering was fundamental to this part of the third sector, and also that volunteering may look very different to the types of organised, structured volunteering activity that takes place within the mainstream. The boundary between volunteering within a community and individuals lives was somewhat blurred. There were no set hours or particular structure or allocated roles. Volunteers acted when needed, often using their own resources. For example women volunteers *'will go the extra mile'* and often shared their own clothes with women in need. MRCO respondents talked of the culturally based requirement to open their doors and share their lives with people from their mother country who were in need, with a risk of *'huge cultural penalties'* for refusing someone in need. Other respondents talked about charismatic leaders who were driven by personal conviction or faith, to spend many hours working with communities.

Some groups brought their own financial or other resources. A BME respondent outlined how a small Pakistani group managed to raise £20,000 from within their own community to build a school in Pakistan. Others gave examples of donations brought to events such as food and musical talents. Many groups were dependent on some kind of social space, often tapping in to physical resources like a school or church, to run their activities. People also used networking skills or *'social capital'*, rather than external *'financial capital'* (e.g. grants/contracts) to access the knowledge or resources they needed to make something happen and policy interviewees stressed:

*'resources beyond the purely financial': 'in terms of people and resources, I think there's an awful lot of barter, there's an awful lot of gift exchange goes on. I think the goodwill of friends and family and community accounts for an awful lot in keeping these places (community centres/village halls) running in practice. I mean I don't think their balance sheets represent, you know, the true value of what gets put into them, what gets generated by them'.*

## Advantages of BTR activity

Despite the literature about small scale community and voluntary sector activity focusing upon the challenges and difficulties faced by this part of the Third Sector, it was clear that many of our respondents saw strengths associated with operating BTR. In particular the ability to target activity exactly where it was needed, to be able to respond quickly and effectively *'be fleet of foot and more responsive'* (rural academic) meant that BTR action was better at meeting need, particularly in *'hard to reach'* situations, than both the state and the mainstream Third Sector: *'you can always reach the*

*parts that Oxfam can't* (MRCO respondent). The ability to operate without regard to *'the rules'* and thus be flexible and independent was also viewed as important:

*'You are not dictated to by anyone external; you can do what you want to do within the resources that you have. You are more likely to meet needs in an effective way. You are free to say what you want, independent and not tied to any funding, funder or project delivery targets'* (woman respondent).

Faith and umbrella respondents stressed the importance of *'just being able to get on with it'* without worrying about bureaucracy. There were none of the complications and stresses associated with external funding. Both arts and faith based groups acknowledged the tensions between regulation which could be seen as overly bureaucratic, costly and off-putting to potential volunteers, versus the need to safeguard vulnerable groups, in particular children and older people.

One MRCO respondent said getting in touch with the radar *'can burn you'* because regulations could force a change in values that meant you were unable to set your own priorities. Once again the ability to provide for needs *'holistically'* was stressed. The faith and MRCO respondents also outlined the benefits of only being accountable to your own members. This enabled organisations to be radical both in their actions and in their thinking. A further respondent outlined the benefits of new migrants bringing *'real life'* to sterilised UK life, creating energy and channelling it into a rejuvenated civil society in super-diverse areas.

## Disadvantages

Most respondents also accepted that there could be disadvantages of BTR activity. A development agency respondent expressed concerns that small scale activity was viewed as dysfunctional because it was not thought of as accountable to the state. There were no guarantees that passionate motivated individuals would do a good job or that successful campaigners could become effective managers of an organisation or service. Depending on charismatic leaders was also a risky strategy because those individuals could burn out or leave and vital activity cease. Furthermore, faith and BME respondents agreed that where action occurred was often a *'postcode lottery'*, may not correspond with need or address very high levels of needs. Groups could be insular, parochial, inward looking or even overtly racist and often had a *'focus on fire-fighting rather than change'*. This could lead to restricted social networks, lack of opportunity and perhaps fossilisation of cultures maintained almost exclusively through small group action. Inexperienced activists or volunteer support workers were often untrained and could give bad advice. They struggled for funds and for premises and, regardless of their capability to do something that could make a difference to their communities, they were unable to meet the scale of need, but small scale community activity was *'better than nothing,'* (woman respondent). There were concerns that small organisations would not be able to cope with regulatory frameworks, for example around child protection or health and safety. Often BTR actions were not linked into the mainstream with networks being *'horizontal'* between community groups rather than being *'vertical'* relationships with Local Authorities and other statutory bodies. Simultaneously the state failed to benefit from the BTR sector's detailed local knowledge, and to



empower the sector to change wider services or ways of thinking. The 'involvement of communities' and local groups in decision making was also seen by a majority of interviewees as largely tokenistic:

*'When small groups are asked to have an input to policy it never gets beyond consultation. It is not a two way process...there is a lack of education around the policy process and understanding that process...also a reliance on external people gathering community views – rather than the community itself. And the balance of power in policy processes makes it very difficult for communities to influence professional services.'*

However, others noted that sometimes lack of accountability meant that groups failed to adapt to meet the needs of those who they were meant to serve. There also could be power struggles and fracturing which led groups to lose their way and to cease providing for their communities. There was also the risk of 'burn out' when small numbers of people became 'over-committed or overstretched' in their community activities. development agency representatives talked of the '*stresses and strains*' of being involved at a community level in regeneration initiatives '*the real risks to health, mental health and relationships*': '*People can destroy their own lives by taking on responsibility for their community. Especially in communities that face a high level of chaos*'. Emotional support and 'time out' for such activists was seen as a neglected element of capacity building agendas and initiatives.

## The impact of BTR activity

A wide range of impacts were identified by respondents. Most occurred at grassroots, highly localised or neighbourhood level. Key areas of impact were:

- small scale service delivery: meeting specialist and distinctive needs although '*they are not necessarily about filling a need, they are about making the need visible*';
- providing for social welfare in rural areas '*all be it fairly informal social services*', reducing isolation and providing people with a social life;
- keeping people away from formal services through providing opportunities like volunteering that improve self-esteem and make people more healthy;
- linking communities to mainstream services;
- supporting regeneration and developing communities;
- acting as a cultural filter to enable agencies to better meet specialist need;
- supporting local economies and economic survival in deprived areas;
- helping newcomers into work;
- running events for local people or interest groups;
- supporting and building the local social fabric by bringing people together around shared interests and concerns;
- helping people to retain their identity;
- improving people's language skills;
- activities and support with education for young people;
- improving local environments through street cleaning and other activities;

- bringing people from different backgrounds together, breaking down barriers and helping to build community cohesion;
- breaking down intergenerational barriers by bringing people together through arts activities and festivals.

Key phrases used throughout interviews to describe impact were *'quality of life'*, *'social networks'* and *'social glue'*.

The rural respondents felt that there was potential for the actions of small groups to extend beyond the local area and to support local democracy through providing an interface between politicians and communities. In addition the participation of groups in strategic partnerships meant there was potential to influence policy. The women's respondent argued that while women's groups did sometimes have an effect on local policy, they did not have the impact at strategic level that was necessary to reduce structural inequalities which ultimately fuelled the problems that many women faced. Faith, MRCOs, rural and umbrella respondents acknowledged that while small groups could, and often did, impact upon community cohesion they could also be a negative force against cohesion particularly where groups were inward looking, exclusive, or actually competing for resources. Furthermore all respondents acknowledged that while there were examples of impacts on community relations, relying on small groups to improve local relations was *'a band aid for haemorrhages'* (faith respondent), that could only be solved through strategic action.

Referring specifically to community arts groups one interviewee noted that whilst some social impacts were recognised in this field, the benefits of small cultural groups to local economies had been under-estimated and under-researched:

*'A lot of the impact is anecdotal rather than what you might call evidence. Arts groups bring together people who would not otherwise come together. They reach 'volunteers' who would not otherwise volunteer. They are important in expressing a sense of identity both as a person and as a community';*

*'There is a big economic impact and that has not really been explored beyond the big arts/regeneration initiatives (for example Baltic in Gateshead). Yet financially (small groups) can bring quite a bit of money into a community – hiring venues, employing professionals, attracting tourism to rural communities with festival, mystery plays and the like. A big, but unrecognised impact'.*

Respondents saw the wide range of local impacts that resulted from BTR actions as partly emerging from the unique way that groups and activities operated. Once again the importance of insider knowledge and personal experience, the *'led by and for movement'* (women's respondent) was stressed. A rural respondent argued that *'they create genuine personal connections on a level that is appropriate. A person to person connection that big agencies just cannot do'*. Personal connections and inside knowledge meant that small groups could understand highly complex needs which could not normally be addressed by the state's sectoral model. Not only could BTR actions operate holistically but they were also argued to provide value for money. One respondent claimed that every £1 invested in a BTR organisation levered £10 more in cash, volunteer time or other gifted resources. Statutory respondents were keen to stress that BTR actions helped the Government to meet its target to build more active and empowered communities and to help communities to help themselves.



However, beyond policy agendas, interviewees stressed: *'the impact is often social. On people's quality of life and friendships. But that should not be under-estimated in terms of importance.'*

## Challenges faced by BTR actions

Respondents identified a wide range of challenges that BTR actions had to overcome in order to function:

- lack of resources. This challenge, commonly identified in the literature (Kendall: 2003, Thompson: 2008), was stressed by some respondents who felt that the state was more likely to fund mainstream organisations. Lack of premises and IT prevented many groups from meeting their community's needs;
- avoiding the pressure to grow and become formalised. Some groups were thought to be successful because they were small; growth would distance them from the communities that they represented to the point that they would lose the unique qualities that went with being led by local people for local people. The gender respondent thought that once 15 or so staff were employed they lost touch with their communities. An MRCO respondent felt that the introduction of funding could have this effect on small RCOs. Certainly respondents felt that growth would inevitably be accompanied by mission drift;
- lack of knowledge about law or regulations. This was seen mainly as a problem for new community groups that lacked cultural knowledge about regulatory frameworks. However other respondents felt it could be an issue for small groups generally. One BME respondent gave the example of community radio where the need for a £5,000 broadcasting licence meant that most communities were unable to participate;
- being undervalued. The rural respondents felt that the statutory sector lacked trust in BTR actions and were unaware of how successful community ownership could be;
- overreliance on charismatic leaders. As well as the problem of *'burn out'* associated with excessive workloads that could leave groups leaderless, there were concerns that strong leaders could be hard to challenge. Internal politics could be divisive and destructive and groups rarely had succession strategies in place. However, reflecting on their own experience within a small community organisation, one Local development agency worker noted the difficulties of *'change and renewal'* from within:

*'It's a really well established committee which has well established ways of working because the key individuals have been involved for a long time it is very difficult to come in as a new person and challenge some of those ways of working';*

- unrealistic demands from policymakers who expect volunteers to participate in partnership working when they lack the capacity in terms of time and skills;
- poor or insular networks meant that groups did not hear about opportunities and may be constantly *'reinventing the wheel'* (BME academic);

- lack of power or access to power. The inability to make the connections needed to change society meant that structural inequalities responsible for the social exclusion of particular groups would continue unchallenged while BTR groups '*pick up the pieces*'. Some respondents (umbrella, development agency and rural) argued that the community consultations that took place were tokenistic because events were arranged around professional convenience rather than the needs of communities;
- the strings attached to most resources offered by the state. Even small amounts of funding were associated with some bureaucracy or an expectation that groups or actions would meet targets. What, however, was seen as more problematic was the nature of some funding regimes:

*'It's hard to generalise about the sustainability of community groups. Some come and go. Some are well established. What is really damaging though is the start/stop cycle of funding. It just builds the group's distrust when the money goes.'*

Despite these challenges all respondents felt that BTR actions were more sustainable than the mainstream Third Sector in recession. This was partly because '*they are already at the bottom and there is no way down*' (BME respondent) but also because BTR actions were far less dependent on external funding than mainstream organisations. One MRCO respondent argued that MRCOs had a stronger survival instinct than other parts of the third sector '*you have to survive; they are the organisations of survivors*'. Arts and umbrella respondents thought that eventually some organisations might see a reduction in income from a drop in bookings or bar income. Respondents saw no sign of an increase in volunteering in BTR organisations associated with increased unemployment, and thought it likely that any extra volunteering capacity would benefit the mainstream TS. However there were indications of an increase in need, so BTR organisations could be placed under greater pressure. In rural areas one respondent said there had been an increase in social enterprise activity as the private sector could no longer afford to operate shops and pubs, so communities had stepped in.

## Accountability

The extent to which BTR actions were viewed as accountable varied. To some the simple fact that people voted with their feet '*if people do not knock at your door you are not good enough*' (MRCO respondent) was sufficient accountability. Formal constituted structures did not necessarily evidence accountability as leaders often put friends or family on the board. Furthermore uneven power relations, often related to the time dedicated to an issue rather than formal status, meant that some individuals pursued their agenda regardless of the needs of their communities or formal decision making processes. Accountability very much depended on the quality of leadership. BTR groups could be genuinely member led and, without a formal constitution, were only answerable to themselves. The tension between formality and local accountability was a concern to rural and BME respondents in particular. While they and some MRCO respondents believed that with the right leader, and a reliance on social norms instead of a constitution, groups could achieve both

accountability and local involvement, some of the development agency, faith and statutory respondents saw the lack of formal structures as a threat to accountability and feared that poor leaders might go unchallenged. In addition they felt that funders were likely to view unconstituted organisations as less legitimate than constituted or registered ones. One MRCO respondent felt that getting all MRCOs registered was a key priority in getting the sector as whole legitimised.

One concern from network agencies was the ‘co-option’ of community politics and activities by, for example, the far right: a co-option that reflected the gap between the rhetoric and realities of community life:

*‘The real issue is that politicians, agencies, talk about communities and community services. But the agencies, the politicians are not in there working at the community level. It’s the far right in England – Sinn Fein and the paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. It’s them who are taking over the community agenda – because they are in there’.*

## Sustainability

Thinking about the BTR ‘sector’ as a whole, most respondents agreed that a thriving BTR sector is ‘incredibly important to health, resilience, well-being and deeper democracy’ (development agency). However on the issue of individual organisations and actions opinions were divided. A faith respondent argued ‘true voluntary and community organisations exist because people want them to’, once they were no longer wanted, there was no reason for them to continue. One of the MRCO respondents also held this view arguing that many MRCOs were needed only for a short period while new migrants settled in the UK. Once their members became integrated into wider society, MRCOs gradually faded. The ability for activities to come and go according to need was viewed by umbrella, BME and development agency respondents as an important characteristic of BTR actions. Sometimes the closure of an organisation was a sign of success: evidence that goals had been met. Concerns were expressed that longevity was a statutory goal and that registration enforced an artificial sustainability upon organisations that sometimes lost their original *raison d’être*.

Some BTR activities and organisations did aspire to grow. Respondents were able to give examples of actions or organisations that they felt had emerged from micro-level community activity. These included the organic agricultural movement, the Strangers into Citizens Campaign to regularise undocumented migrants, the Northern Ireland peace process and the hospice movement. They were also able to give examples of organisations that had grown from informal groups into service providers. These included several MRCOs with service level agreements to offer supplementary education, employment, housing and welfare support to new arrivals, a church-run glue sniffing support group that turned into a counselling organisation, knife crime groups, a wildlife group in London that now has over 100 staff, and a tranquiliser support group that started on an estate, got funding from a PCT and then was able to influence commissioning.

## Supporting BTRs

Given the varied aspirations and trajectories of the BTR sector, the kinds of support utilised and needed was also argued to be variable. The most important relationships and support offered within

the sector was from other organisations. Networks were of critical importance to help groups learn from the experiences of others. Respondents were also able to identify key agencies that could influence the vibrancy of the sector. Most respondents agreed that a supportive local authority was critical but relationships with authorities required good relationships between the sector and individuals working in authorities:

*'the relationship that they have with their local authority again varies from – I mean that seems to depend, since I've arrived here I've realised how much it depends on individuals, you know, the individual officers and the individuals in the organisations'.*

Problems could arise if local councillors did not favour a group. Also mentioned were community development workers, the local CVS, and development agencies. Rural respondents saw ACRE, the rural community councils, the Arthur Rank Centre and Carnegie Trust as important. MRCOs found Refugee Action and the Evelyn Oldfield Unit useful. A development agency respondent expressed concerns that Local Strategic Partnerships had as yet failed to engage with the BTR sector. While the arts organisation said there was a need to highlight good practice as many BTR groups were reinventing the wheel around event organisation.

Statutory, development agency and umbrella respondents saw umbrella organisations as important to the BTR sector in terms of offering advice, policy briefings, helping them to access small grants, for example £50 for Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks, linking them to information and cheap insurance or helping out in an emergency. The arts and faith respondents felt that umbrella organisations helped to push their sub-sectors up the agenda, and make them more visible. However it was acknowledged that not all BTR groups needed or wanted to be part of a network. Many were happy to continue to operate without any assistance.

Concerns were expressed about the capacity building agenda *'capacity building has lost the plot. There is a need for infrastructure support but a lot of energy has gone into structures that don't work'* (rural respondent). With the exception of the statutory respondents there was a consensus that capacity building had done little for small groups. Capacity building had been driven by government agendas to try to encourage small groups to engage in commissioning rather than responding to the needs of small groups. Instead groups needed help to build relationships, and signposting to advice and support:

*'Professionalised support and development is not always appropriate for small groups. There is a real lack of appropriate support for small and new groups. It's about quick fixes rather than a process and too often it is about external agendas and the survival of the support agency rather than the needs of the group'.*

*'All too often capacity building has an assessment based approach. It's an audit to tell people what they need and what is needed is a more community development approach which starts where people/groups are and works with their needs'.*

Capacity building appeared to assume linear development, and not to recognise that many BTR activists may not want to grow, but instead to improve what they were already doing through increased knowledge of regulatory structures and a bit of *'hand holding'* (umbrella respondent). Some useful initiatives were described. These included *'no strings'* small grants, networking events, help accessing funds and provision of community development workers. Development Agencies having the capacity

to deliver outreach services was seen as crucial in extending their reach to small BTR community groups.

Many of the respondents in the study were in a position to offer support to the BTR sector. Statutory respondents had funded, rather than run, programmes such as the Empowerment Fund and Grassroots Grants, and also sought to make the regulatory framework more favourable for small groups. Umbrella organisations helped people to navigate around Government funds and initiatives, gave health checks and provided cheap insurance. Development agencies offered advice about collective action, helped with organising skills and aimed to develop the knowledge base through research. Rural and MRCO respondents provided advice, training, help to complete forms, small grants and help with registration. The gender organisation offered training, one to one help and lobbied decision makers.

## Discussion

While most respondents categorised the term below the radar as relating to small scale, generally unregistered community based, voluntary actions, the presence of multiple radars, depending on the perspectives of different organisations and institutions, and their interests or priorities, meant that there was no consensus about the usefulness of the term. While a few respondents felt it summed up the range of low profile activity that occurred at ground level, others felt it was too amorphous to be of use, or even disempowering. However no one term emerged that could be used to discuss the kinds of micro-level, community focused activity that all agreed formed the most significant part of the third sector in terms of scale. Until something better emerges BTR can function as a shorthand term to encapsulate the kinds of small scale, community based actions that we have discussed in this paper.

Where consensus did occur was around the importance of this part of the sector to individuals, communities and to policymakers. A wide range of claims were made about the function, distinctiveness and impact of the sector. Clearly the nature of those claims varied according to the perspective of interviewees, the role they undertook and, where relevant, the part of the sector they represented. Nonetheless some generalisations about BTR activity and organisations did emerge. The BTR sector was seen as being extremely broad in scope, filling gaps in provision both at neighbourhood level and for groups with a common interest or need. BTR actions focussed upon solving problems, giving voice, bringing people together, helping the vulnerable and needy, maintaining cultural identity and providing entertainment and enjoyment. Actions emerged from common interests, a common enemy or problem, gaps in state or mainstream service provision, and social isolation. They may also result from stimulus such as community development or regeneration.

Respondents made the case for the BTR sector being distinctive from both the state and the mainstream Third Sector. Within BTR groups and organisations boundaries were blurred between the personal, the political, and civic action. Actions were generally resourced from within communities using time, expertise, social networks and whatever else people could lay their hands on. Contradicting the literature, not all groups lacked resources. Some could marshal considerable funds when needed; often from within their own, deprived, communities. Respondents also claimed that BTR actions were distinctive because of their fluid and flexible nature. Lifecycles of actions varied

according to need. Some groups, particularly in the arts thrived for many years, without any need for change. Others arose in response to need, and disappeared as soon as the need was addressed. Many BTR actions, regardless of which sub-sector they emerged from, were ideologically or experientially driven by people who wanted to make a difference to their own lives, or to those of their community. Local or community specific knowledge appeared to be the key to the responsiveness of BTR actions. While sub-sectors clearly operated within their own specific knowledge base, be that cultural practices, rural living or women's oppression, each used that knowledge to act for their community. This knowledge together with being embedded within their communities meant they knew exactly what actions were required to address need, and they were trusted by the community to do what was required. For some being below the regulatory radar was an advantage to small groups enabling them to operate differently from the mainstream. Not constrained by bureaucracy or regulation they could do what they wanted, change their approach when necessary, and be radical.

The impact of the sector was as broad as its scope. Claims were made about the sector's role in informal service provision, as intermediaries using specialised knowledges to link the vulnerable to the help they needed, in reducing isolation, stimulating local economies, improving local environments and promoting community cohesion through events and activities. Some actions helped to meet local policy goals, and some groups were able to influence local policy. While respondents agreed that much could and should be learned from BTR groups both from their experiential and grounded knowledges, and from their responsive, flexible and holistic approaches to delivery, it was clear that BTR action had little impact at strategic level. There were some examples of BTR actions that had grown into nationally important campaigns or movement, but most often groups continued to address problems at local level without having the power to influence the structural issues that were said to underpin the gaps and needs that they felt compelled to address.

Being independent of external resources meant that on the whole BTR actions were faring relatively well in the recession, albeit under increased pressure for their services. While statutory and some development agency respondents expressed concerns about lack of accountability within the sector, others argued that BTR organisations were accountable to their communities who '*voted with their feet*' if they felt the actions were not appropriate. Good leadership was viewed as being critical to the sector and could make the difference between accountability and near dictatorship.

The BTR sector did indeed suffer from some of the challenges widely discussed in the literature. Lack of resources could be a problem, as could over-regulation, being under-valued, lacking power and being placed under pressure to grow. In terms of support it was clear that the capacity building agenda had failed small groups. Rather than encouraging growth and formalisation, many BTR actions were providing for their community's needs as they were. The secret of their success was their size and closeness to their constituents. They were already delivering services. Forcing them to engage with the commissioning agenda meant they would then be constrained by targets and bureaucracy instead of driven by ideology and aided by social networks. While the BTR sector did in some areas help to meet policy targets in employment, regeneration and cohesion it was clear that few respondents saw them as a viable strategic response to social exclusion or race relations across the piece because they lacked the coverage or consistency needed. Existence and performance of

BTR actions was patchy, not always related to need, and not always doing a good job. Rather than support that pushed a particular agenda on small groups and organisations it was clear that BTR actions needed less structured support to enable them to improve what they do, and perhaps work more efficiently. Some may need no support and wanted to be left alone to do what they do well.

## Conclusion

The data presented within this paper provides evidence that builds upon the anecdote and rhetoric about the importance and distinctiveness of informal and small actions within the community and voluntary sector. Claims about the distinctiveness of sub-sectors such as rural, MRCO, BME and women's are both supported and refuted; while they operate with different knowledges which make them distinct, they do so in a similar way. While they share common ground in terms of being led by, and for, their constituents, driven by need, responding to gaps in mainstream provision, sharing common interests, acting holistically and flexibly, using resources sourced internally, a key factor is that they base their actions upon their own distinctive local, and specific, knowledges that can only result from lived experience. They also operate using social networks only available to those who share experience or geography. Perhaps the most important finding emerging from this study is the importance of local knowledge and networks. BTR actions are able to act upon knowledge, and with social networks, because they are generally free of the burden of bureaucracy and targets that prevent flexible and holistic responses. Further research is needed to explore whether the claims made by respondents about the distinctive approach adopted by the BTR play out at ground level. Such research might explore the extent to which the specific and experiential knowledges said to be so important in the BTR sector could also help to shape the way that policy is made, and services are provided. It would also explore the nature of resources like local knowledge and social networks, and the way that they operate, and could help us to understand better how mainstream service providers and the wider third sector might utilise local knowledge both to shape its practices and to address the structural inequalities that our respondents have argued are often the catalyst for BTR actions.



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## About the Centre

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## Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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