'Below the radar' activities and organisations in the third sector: a summary review of the literature

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Abstract

The term 'below, or under, the radar' has become a short-hand term often applied to describe small voluntary organisations, community groups and more informal or semi-formal activities in the third sector.

This paper presents the findings of a literature review which explores understandings of the term 'below the radar' and its usefulness in thinking about community based organisations and activities.

The paper also uses the literature to explore the nature, role, and focus of small scale organisations and activities, as well as the challenges they face. It draws on a wide range of materials and an academic literature which has tended to focus on either concepts of 'organisation' rather than more informal community activity, or particular 'sub-sections' of the third sector; Black and Minority Ethnic groups, Refugee and Migrant Organisations, arts and cultural groups; rather than the small scale sector as whole. Finally, it identifies gaps in the current literature and contentious questions relating to our knowledge of 'below the radar' community groups and activities.

Introduction

The phrase below, or under, the radar (BTR) is often used to describe small, community based organisations, refugee and migrant groups in the UK. There are a number of ways of conceptualising the term 'under the radar'. The term most commonly refers to activities or groups that do not have a recognised legal status and do not, therefore, appear on the Charity Commission or other regulatory registers or those that are registered but have low incomes or turnover (MacGillivray, 2001; CEFET, 2007).

Interest in 'below the radar' activities has grown in recent times and cuts across a wide range of current 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 governance, 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 including, for example, Community Empowerment Networks and subsequently Regional Empowerment Partnerships.

This paper presents some of the existing literature covering these small, under the radar, groups and activities. For a number of reasons it cannot be described as a systematic literature review. Firstly, much of the material on small community groups is not easily or openly accessible, existing in 'internal' evaluations of, for example, Area Based Initiatives. Secondly, the academic literature on the subject is extremely fragmented, with (occasional) articles appearing in journals with areas of interest as diverse as public management, human geography, rural/urban studies and psychology (Edwards, 2000). Thirdly, in its current form, the paper reflects not only gaps in the existing research, for example on cultural and sports groups, but also the particular interests and backgrounds of the current authors in working with Black and Minority Ethnic, refugee and migrant groups.

The review is therefore a working document which will be further developed as the Third Sector Research Centre's research programme evolves. It should be viewed as a starting point which asks a series of questions about this part of the third sector, including how useful is the term 'below the radar' in describing those groups or activities which have traditionally been referred to as part of the community sector or grassroots action? What functions do they perform within neighbourhoods, communities of interest or communities of identity? What is their history and trajectory in the current political and economic climate? Who is involved and why? If 'below the radar' groupings are expected to play a greater role in the delivery of public policy, are they able, or do they want, to engage in this agenda? The review also seeks to identify gaps in existing literature on the sector and to make some suggestions about questions that need to be addressed in order to improve understanding of 'below the radar 'activity.

The scale of 'below the radar' activity

Little is known about the exact extent of small voluntary, community or below the radar activity. Discussing the rural voluntary sector Blackburn *et al.* (2003) note the absence of a detailed knowledge about, and therefore the need to map the extent, scale and nature of micro voluntary organisations and community groups in rural areas. Looking at infra-structure development needs in Greater Manchester, where mapping has taken place, Martikke and Tramonti (2005) note there is still no authoritative list of services and question whether there can be such a list, given the diversity of the sector and the different stages of development of community organisations in different areas of Greater Manchester. A lack of understanding of the extent and workings of civil society organisations, particularly within smaller/more recently arrived communities, is a theme across the 13 Communities and Local Government studies on Muslim communities in England (2009).

This situation is neatly summarised by Toepler (2003) who concludes that

> *'perhaps one of the few remaining big mysteries in non-profit sector research is the question of what we are missing by excluding those organisations from empirical investigations that are not easily captured in standard data sources'* (p.236)

In terms of measuring, or quantifying, the wider third sector there are now almost 171,000 registered charities in the UK (NCVO, 2009), with a further 2,107 community interest companies[1] (CIC Regulator, 2008), 4,573 co-operatives (Co-operatives UK, 2007) and a further 9,930 societies registered with the Financial Services Authority. Beyond this there are estimates of the number of non-profit enterprises with social goals (based on data held by Companies House) of 6,700 and for exempted charities of between 3,490 and 5,091 (NCVO, 2009). In total, therefore, there are just over 200,000 third sector organisations that are known to, regulatory bodies. An additional 127,000 sports and recreational groups might also be considered as part of the mainstream sector (Sport England, 2009).

Once we broaden the focus to the wider, unregulated sector it becomes far more difficult to make any claims about the size of the sector. MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) argue there are more than 900,000 micro-organisations in the UK. The New Economics Foundation estimate is between 600,000 and 900,000 (cited in NCVO, 2009) and the NCVO estimate some 870,000 'civil society' organisations; whilst noting that the quality of data on informal community organisations is poor. Further, profiles of community action do not, as of yet, include or quantify virtual/on line actions associated with new social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 1999; Smith and McCabe, 2009).

This lack of knowledge about the nature and extent of BTR activity is not just a UK phenomenon. In the USA Holland and Ritvo (2008) argue that the majority of third sector organisations are not on the Internal Revenue Service records and are not legally constituted. Toepler (2003) suggests that over 70% of US VCOs are very small organisations of which only 30% were registered.

Depending on which estimate is endorsed these figures suggest that small community organisations are some three to five times greater in number than the 'mainstream' voluntary sector and yet, as we will show, comparatively little is known about the definition, scale, or functioning of this part of the sector. The numbers of BTR activities, groups and organisations counted, estimated and researched depends very much on the way this part of the sector is defined. The next section of the paper will give some consideration to definitional issues.

Defining 'below the radar' organisations and activities in the third sector

As outlined above, legal and/or financial criteria have generally been used to define below the radar (BTR) activity. However other issues, those of governance, ability to influence and access to resources, have also been raised as being possible indicators or types of below the radar activity, and thus demand further examination.

'Unregulated' activity and organisations

Consideration of legal status dominates understandings of beneath or below the radar (BTR) in the literature. The above 'count' of activity is based on the registered/unregistered binary. This approach is widely accepted as a way of identifying informal activity. For example MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) use the term BTR to refer to those groups or activities that are 'unregulated', 'semi-formal' associations. These activities or organisations do not appear in databases held by the Charity Commission, Companies House, the Registrar of Community Interest Companies, or Guidestar. While it could be argued that this legal or regulatory approach is appropriate for some parts of the sector, for example migrant and refugee organisations (MRCOs) which tend to operate largely as unregulated organisations, (Zetter *et al,.* 2005; Phillimore *et al.,* 2009), many other often very small operations do register in some way, so that they are able to access funds from grant making trusts. Much recent research activity, including that recently commissioned by the Northern Rock Foundation[2], Regional Action West Midlands[3] and the Office of the Third Sector, has focused on the unregulated part of the third sector. [4] This research has concentrated on organisation and structure rather than necessarily wider understandings of below the radar *activities* and their role both at a community level and within the wider, formalised, third sector.

The over-reliance upon legalistic and financial definitions of 'below the radar' are beginning to be acknowledged and are illustrated well in a recent Office of the Third Sector guidance paper (2008, p.2)

> *'The phrase under the radar is ungainly, but is the best available terminology for those organisations which are not included in the main national registers. The term is often associated with small community organisations which are not large enough to register with the Charity Commission or Companies House and are perhaps associated more closely with community building and participation than with service delivery. However, many very small organisations do register and so suggestions that the under the radar segment of the sector is synonymous with smaller charities can be misleading.[5]*

Thus it is necessary to look either for a more sophisticated definition of BTR activity that incorporates consideration of a wider range of 'radars' than just the regulatory, and perhaps begin to question the usefulness of the term itself. We now move on to explore alternative radars.

Finance and resources

Some commentators consider that very small registered organisations and activities may operate under a financial, rather than regulatory, radar. There is no consensus about the threshold of income that leaves activities under the financial radar. NCVO describes charities with incomes of less than £10,000 per annum as 'micro charities' (NCVO, 2009). Thompson (2008), researching BTR third

sector groups working with children and families, identified two funding thresholds; organisations with funding less than £250,000, which are small, relative to the big children's charities; and 'smaller' under the radar organisations with income of less than £50,000 per year.

Alternatively CEFET (2007) use an annual income of £35,000 to define 'grass-roots or street level' organisations when researching European Union supported social inclusion projects. This level of finance was, they argue, unlikely to support more than one worker, meaning that these small groups were likely to be managed from within excluded communities. Such levels of funding were likely to leave groups with limited capacity to work beyond their immediate area, or secure longer-term 'sustainable' income streams.

MacGillivray *et al.* (2001) do not identify any maximum annual income levels associated with being under the radar preferring instead to stress the lack of dependable agency funding of any significance. Conversely, some organisations may hold substantial capital assets for example tenants or village halls, but limited annual revenues. Others may have annual turnovers of over both £50,000, or even £250,000, generated through trading activity such as community centres with bars or room hire facilities, but employ no full time or professional staff (Community Matters/LGA, 2006). Although the existence of a distinctive MME third sector is contested, research in this area demonstrates that it is dominated by small organisations and semi-formalised activities. Research in this field has shown that a combination of low incomes and irregular funding were the norm for most migrant and refugee community organisations (MRCOs) whether registered or not (Zetter *et al.,* 2005; Phillimore *et al.,* 2009; Phillimore and Goodson, 2009).

Closely related to the issue of finance, other commentators have noted the absence of capital resources in BTR activities (NCVO, 2009). Micro activities or organisations often have no regular premises or full-time or permanent staff, a situation that is mirrored in small migrant organisations (MacGillivray *et al.,* 2001; Zetter *et al.,* 2005; Phillimore *et al.,* 2009; Phillimore and Goodson, 2009).

Governance and leadership

Broader issues of governance are also relevant to the discussion around defining or identifying BTR activity. Kendall and Knapp (1996) view voluntary governance, along with non-profit distributing, independence and formality as the key factors in understanding and defining the sector. However Morgan (2008) asks whether organisations need to be governed collectively in order to be defined as voluntary organisations at all. Relating voluntary and community action to these definitions could mean excluding informal groups taking action on issues of shared concern either by themselves or with others (Richardson, 2008).   Others argue that micro–organisations are invariably informal, lacking the direct representative decision making associated with formal status (MacGillivray *et al.,* 2001) and that informality brings different goals, continuity and leadership (Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005).

Policy

Despite community based organisations' lack of status, influence or, indeed, official recognition by statutory agencies (McCabe *et al.,* 2007) issues of 'community' and 'community organisation' have played an increasingly important role in governmental, and cross party, policy in recent years.

> *'A healthy community sector is critical for the sustainability of local communities. It is not an end in itself. It helps deliver social capital, social cohesion and democratic participation. Better public investment in the sector will result in a better quality of life for*

local people and local communities, partly through their own direct activities and partly through their interaction with public services.' (CLG, 2007b, p.1)

Part of this agenda has been informed by drivers towards a mixed economy of welfare, procurement and commissioning procedures, and increasing the role of the formal voluntary sector, as well as community groups, in public service provision both generally and at the neighbourhood level (Home Office, 2005).

There has been a parallel process in financing community sector infrastructure driven in part by concerns around the perceived decline in social capital and accompanying 'democratic deficit' (Putnam, 2000), and alleged lack of community cohesion in diverse areas (Cantle, 2005). Policy interest in developing 'community capacity' has resulted in the creation of Community Empowerment Networks, and subsequently Regional Empowerment Partnerships (Home Office, 2004), and a growing interest in the concepts of community anchor organisations and community leadership (CLG, 2007a, 2007b). However, this investment in the community sector, with similar capacity building investment in faith based and BME organisations, has often been short lived, focused on priority or Neighbourhood Renewal Fund areas and been dependent on short term finance for example European funding such as ERDF/ESF, or more recently Prevention of Violent Extremism monies (PVE) or cohesion funding. It also lacked a clear definition or understanding of the meaning and aims of 'community capacity building' (Harris, 1998). The extent to which this activity has impacted upon the under the radar voluntary/community groups is unclear (Harris and Schlappa, 2008). There is clearly a great deal of pressure upon small organisations to deliver many of the outcomes sought by policymakers particularly in relation to community relations and social capital, but little known about the nature and function of such organisations. The extent to which BTR groups and organisations have been able to benefit from recent policy initiatives or influence policy development is not clear from the existing literature. However whether or not the activities of parts of the third sector are on or below the policy radar (e.g. operating beyond, or unrecognised by, official Government agendas) is clearly of importance when researching small scale third sector activity.

Classification

Once thinking about the term 'below the radar' moves beyond organisational types and income levels there is an added layer of complexity. Small BME, refugee and community groups may not fall neatly into the 'classic' classifications of the voluntary sector. Using, for example, the International Classification of Non-profit Organisations (Salamon and Anheier, 1997), even the smallest of such groups can be fulfilling multiple functions: direct service delivery, advocacy, community representation, cultural and educational activities (Minkler, 2005). Thus, BTR organisations may be addressing multiple governmental objectives but remain below the regulatory, financial or formal charity/company governance radars. As Cnaan and Milofsky (1997) note, measuring the extent of BTR activity is acknowledged to be problematic. Measuring, counting or even identifying small informal, often short life campaigns around a specific issue such as a church fundraising for a new roof or community actions on road safety is difficult. NGOs are usually understood in terms of organisational and management theory (Handy, 1997) which could be problematic when trying to consider the role and function of very small informal groupings which have been described as BTR and have not yet been systematically researched or analysed within organisational theory frameworks (Handy, 1993).

Approaches to mapping the scale of BTR activity

We have established that most of the research undertaken to date around the notion of 'below the radar' third sector activity uses the definition in legalistic or regulatory terms. Most researchers trying to establish the scale of third sector activity have relied upon regulatory data for pragmatic reasons. Researching 'hidden' or BTR activity is expensive and methodologically complex (Soteri-Proctor and Smith, 2003). An alternative and relatively well established approach to mapping activity levels was initiated in the 1990's by the Home Office Local Voluntary Action Surveys (LOVAS – Marshall, 1997). A variation of this approach has been applied more recently in, for example, The Northern Rock Foundation sponsored research into the third sector in the North East of England and involved a process whereby entries on regulators' registers are cross referenced with local data-sets such as those held by Councils of Voluntary Service, Local Authorities, and regional and national network organisations, to identify the proportion of activity that is unregistered.

Others have used a more financially based definition (Thompson, 2008; CEFET, 2007) and surveyed income levels to determine what percentage of activity is 'below the radar'. The majority of unregulated third sector groups would fall below this financial threshold in terms of income; as indeed would substantial sections of the regulated bodies, whether they are charities or co-operatives. However both these approaches rely upon the presence of some kind of dataset in order to identify activity or respondents. This will omit activity initiated since lists were completed as well as, informal activity, unnamed activity, and types of activity that is intentionally under the radar.

A third, even more intensive approach has been tested in recent years (Harris and Young 2009; Phillimore *et al.,* 2003, 2006). This involves using national and local data-sets to identify particular organisational 'sub-sets', e.g. refugee and migrant organisations, interviewing or surveying representatives from those organisations and then asking respondents to identify all the third sector activity they are aware of in their geographic or thematic area. The respondent then continues this snowballing approach by contacting organisations named and then asking them similar questions until a saturation point is reached and no more new activities are identified.

Whilst this approach brings an added depth to the purely quantitative surveys/analysis of secondary data, and is effective in reaching under-researched groups, it is extremely labour intensive and thus costly. For these reasons it is unlikely the approach could be replicated beyond micro-geographic areas and/or particular smaller communities of interest and identity. Despite a range of attempts to understand and quantify activity that is BTR we still lack an understanding of the extent of activity or the role and function of BTR activities and organisations particularly in relation to policy. This next section will explore the role and function of different organisations considered in the literature to be BTR.

The role and function of BTR activity and organisations

Academic research into the third sector is a relatively recent phenomenon in the UK and beyond. Archambault (1997) describes the voluntary sector in France as 'terra incognito'. While American authors (Minkler, 2005; Holland and Ritvo, 2008) have commented on the lack of systematic and longitudinal research into voluntary organisations. The first major studies on scope, definitions and typology emerged in the early to mid 1990's (Salamon and Anheier, 1997; Kendall and Knapp, 1996). International and comparative literature is also in its relative infancy (Barbetta 1997) and research into BTR even less developed. Most publications focus upon the formal service delivery part of the sector, and the larger agencies with capacity to formally provide services (Kendall, 2003). Research on BTR is most likely to appear in the community development literature (Ledwith, 2005, Craig *et al.,* 2008) and to focus upon contested concepts of community and models of working with communities, rather than 'below the radar' community organisations themselves (Banks *et al.,* 2003; Gilchrist, 2004). Substantive research into BTR activity is underdeveloped and relies heavily on anecdote and received wisdom rather than, necessarily, rigorous research evidence.

Much of the available mainstream literature focuses on the functioning of, and pressures upon, BTR organisations and is often related to particular 'sub-sets' of below the radar organisations for example refugee groups and faith based organisations. What might be referred to as generic material on the subject is limited and relates to concepts of leadership, informality and external relations with other statutory and voluntary agencies. Studies of the function of local BTR activity tend to be undertaken for local authorities and other local funders as well as for area based initiatives but are produced for internal purposes so rarely enter the wider public domain. In the absence of empirical evidence, views about BTR activity depend on the theoretical or political outlook adopted

> *'VSOs [Voluntary Sector Organisations] may thus either be marginal (from the economic perspective) or crucially important (from the voluntarism or social capital perspective)'* (Toepler, 2003, p.238).

In the US Toepler (2003), studying 'grassroots organisations' notes that traditional foundational theories of the non-profit sector have taken the twin failures of markets and governments as their starting point (Kalifon, 1991). Thus, it can be argued that third sector organisations exist as alternative providers of goods and services and bring added value in their capacity to innovate and reach particularly marginalised groups (Boateng, 2002). Alternatively others argue that very small VCOs may make very little contribution in this sphere where they are driven more by notions of solidarity, mutuality, and voluntary altruism than the provision of professionalized services (Barnes *et al.,* 2006).

Research into leadership of small volunteer-led groups, found that they largely existed independently from other organisations, with any external relationships tending to be with specialist infrastructure bodies or their local authorities, rather than generalist volunteering infrastructure bodies, or through networking with other VCOs (Ockenden and Hutin, 2008). Groups were often led by a figurehead, but otherwise structures varied considerably. The figurehead was judged by the researchers to generally demonstrate high levels of involvement, commitment and passion. A strong tendency was displayed towards informal functioning as formal management systems were

considered to be inappropriate or ineffective. The study found little evidence to suggest that leaders felt overburdened by workload or time commitment. This is despite the fact that Ockenden and Hutin (2008) found numerous instances of life inside and outside of the group becoming blurred, with the social and family life of volunteers closely connected to the work of the group. Groups in Ockenden and Hutin's research commonly gave thought to maintaining a mix of skills among volunteers. The most common approach to recruitment, continuing the theme of informality, was to rely on word of mouth and personal contact.

Having briefly considered the literature into the wider BTR sector we now look in more detail at five 'sub-groupings or sectors' on which academic research has focused more though in variable detail. These include BME and refugee, faith, rural, neighbourhood and arts and cultural, based activities.

Function of black, minority ethnic, refugee and migrant activities and organisations

Research by Mcleod *et al.* (2001) indicated that there were in the region of 5,500 BME organisations in England and Wales, although projections from the Home Office LOVAS surveys suggest that this is a substantial under-estimate as the data does not capture the large number of extremely informal groups which were seen as a core part of civil society (Marshall, 1997). However the extent to which a distinctive BME or refugee community sector can be identified is open to debate. The Deakin Commission (1996) calls for the 'myth of separateness' to be questioned arguing that integrated services are generally preferable, and the characteristics of BME organisations are often the same as any other dealing with a target group with specific needs e.g. homelessness (NCVO, 1996). Others disagree, believing that this is a distinct part of the voluntary and community sector and should be viewed as such in government funding policy (SIA, 1998 cited in McLeod *et al.,* 2001). In addition questions have been raised about whether organisations be defined as 'BME', 'refugee' or 'immigrant' if they include people in their membership who do not fit into these categories and whether there is a point at which people have been settled in their adopted country long enough to no longer be considered as immigrants or refugees (Moya 2005). Griffiths *et al.* (2006) note that the terms used to describe refugee community organisations vary greatly in the academic literature. Refugee associations, refugee organisations, refugee-based organisations, refugee community organisations or refugee community-based organisations can all be observed. They suggest that terminology matters because it says something about the relationship between refugee organisations and the communities they are assumed to represent, and also because a clearer conception may resolve some of the '*conflicting pressures faced by refugee organisations and the ambiguities surrounding their role*' (p.844).

Some have tried to define RCOs under categories such as cultural, political and advice based (Joly, 1996), while others suggest that the term RCO embraces '*a variety of informal networks and more formalised bureaucratic arrangements amongst members of refugee communities*' (Griffiths *et al*, 2005 p.188). Alternatively, Fennema, (2004) provides three categories. Groups based on common socio-economic interests are called ethnic interest organisations; those based on a shared conception of the common good are called ethnic political associations; and if they are focused on the maintenance of the ethnic culture they are called ethnic identity organisations.

Putting aside definitional issues there seems to be some agreement that that BME and RCO BTR groups are generally concerned with two main types of activity: filling gaps in public services where the mainstream has failed to meet needs, and cultural solidarity or identity (Sivanandan, 1982; Carey-Wood, 1997). Chouhan and Lusane (2004) found that BME VCOs often provided a range of specialist services for young people, older people and disabled people, including advice, health services (mental and physical) and welfare and income support. Others have noted that groups also play a role in community advocacy, campaigns for increased rights, anti-discrimination, and access to mainstream services (McLeod *et al* 2001). These studies focused upon the whole BME sector rather than simply BTR activity. It is possible that smaller activities focus less upon service provision and more on identity politics, social and cultural support?

Schrover and Vermeulen (2005) argue that migrant and refugee associations play a vital role in the acculturation process. In particular refugee organisations are said to be vitally important, but relatively unrecognised, in supporting the integration of new arrivals into mainstream society (Salinas *et al* 1987; Vergara *et al* 2008). RCOs help build networks which in turn provide refugees with social capital that can help link them to employment (Duke, 1996). They are widely seen in the literature as providing a link to the host society, and as such are essential to the integration of refugees (Zetter *et al.,* 2005). The role of RCOs and BME organisations in either maintaining cultural identity, or promoting the development of social capital with the wider community, has become contentious in recent years with policy moving from multi-cultural celebration of diversity, to concern that small ethnically based groups help promote the living of 'parallel lives' associated with the alleged breakdown in community cohesion (Cantle, 2005).

Griffiths *et al* (2005) suggest that *'far from being central to the integration of refugees… RCOs may rather perpetuate marginality from within their designated roles as service providers on the edges of their communities'* (p.202). They and Gamelidin-Ashami *et al*. (2002) argue that most RCOs do not have the resources to contribute to the long-term integration of refugees and act as defensive, front line gap-filling, more than training resource for individual or community integration. Schrover and Vermeulen (2005) identify both the above 'integrational and separatist' models across different refugee and migrant groups. They suggest that one function of immigrant organisations is more for external value: so others can address immigrants as a collective. They take this fact to indicate that one of the raison d'être's of ethnically defined VCOs is collective identity maintenance, both internally, and in the eyes of the host society. However, they also suggest that it is to the advantage of the host government to *'use immigrant organisations to mould immigrants into a coherent community'* (p.826) and highlight the difference between those who wish to encourage integration and those aiming to set themselves apart from society. Much of the literature around BME and refugee organisations assumed a polarisation between integrative and separatist outlooks, despite widespread acknowledgement of the contested and individual nature of integration (Phillimore and Goodson, 2008). Further research is needed to understand more fully the role of minority or migrant organisations in community relations.

Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) and activities

Little research was undertaken on the role and function of religious/faith based VCOs (RCVOs) until the late 1990s (Cnaan and Milofsky, 1997). RVCOs, sometimes called FBOs, are characterised by their small scale, with much activity happening in often un-consecrated and therefore 'unregistered' places of worship. Work from this period is largely led by voluntary sector researchers themselves who have focused upon the role, function and categorisation of FBOs and responding to questions around the performance of this 'value led' sector relative to the wider third sector (see for example Chaves & Tsistos 2001).

The religious affiliation of faith based groups varies according to geographical location. For example, rural areas in the UK tend to be dominated by Christian groups with the church as a focus for voluntary action (Grieve *et al.,* 2007) while urban areas tend to be more religiously and culturally diverse, reflected in the growth of broad based movements such as London Citizens (Jochum *et al.,* 2007). Lowndes and Chapman (2005) suggest that there are three main rationales for faith group involvement in civil renewal: promoting community values and identities, organisational capacity and ability to mobilise resources, and leadership inside communities and broader networks and partnerships. Much activity in this sector is seen as informal, often involving one off campaigns, for example fundraising to pay for a new church roof. However, Cnaan and Milofsky (1997) also argue that like RCOs, faith based organisations, sometimes operate to fill gaps in mainstream services and take on campaigns and support for individuals such as local anti-deportation campaigns. Wolpert (1997) looking at small religious non-profits' role in the US argues that they play an important role in the delivery of services but that this is not easily measured and is consequently under reported. Services provided are likely to be secular in nature but the effect of religious affiliation is nonetheless significant.

As with RCOs the role of faith based groups in policy objectives such as community cohesion and combating extremism has moved up the political agenda in recent years with the Government establishing the Faith Communities Consultative Council. Research by Harris and Young (2009) identified a wide range of what they called 'bridge building activities'; neighbourhood-based actions between people of different faiths in three UK case studies areas which contributed to community and social cohesion in their local areas. Elsewhere there has been a growing research interest in the role of rural faith groups (Ellis *et al* 2004) in the delivery of rural services, although the evidence base for, and understanding of, rural action remains relatively weak (Jochum *et al.,* 2007). Further work is needed on the role and function of the different kinds of faith based activity.

Tenants' and residents' groups

Many of the definitions of neighbourhood and residents groups incorporate BTR activity. Downs (1981, cited in Cnann, 1991) identifies two types of neighbourhood based organisations, both with the primary aim of improving the quality of life of residents. The first type incorporates any group (voluntary, public or for profit) operating within a neighbourhood and serving the interests of residents. Many of these will be 'on the radar' of housing providers and social landlords. The second includes neighbourhood representative organisations (NROs). These are local, completely voluntary, managed

by local residents and seeking to represent all residents. Many of them could be argued to operate BTR.

The role of tenants and residents organisations is to represent the people living in a given place, to empower them and to campaign around one or a number of causes that are relevant to the members of the group and those they represent, and sometimes to provide services to tenants and/or residents. Thus, they mediate between local residents and the government and large service providers (Berger and Neuhaus, 1977) although little is known about the ways in which they perform this mediating role.

Such organisations have long been viewed as the quintessential example of democracy at work. However, Cnann (1991) challenges the widely held view that neighbourhood-representing organisations are the most authentic form of citizen participation and local democracy. While he accepts that such organisations are an important element of democratic society, he suggests the way they operate rarely offers an example of good democratic practice. Thus, Cnann's thesis is that there is a discrepancy between potential and actual levels of democracy in such organisations. Democratic potential is not just limited by internal functioning, external barriers may be more significant. Chaskin (2003) notes that when statutory bodies wish to engage with communities they often either select larger or already known VCOs, or they create new groups. This, he suggests, ignores the already existing organisations and mechanisms that in different ways seek (or are seen) to speak for and act on behalf of the residents of a given neighbourhood. However, he also points out that there remains a lot that is not known about the relationship between the organisations that act as proxies for the community they serve, and the communities on whose behalf they work. There is also much more to be learned about the possibilities and limitations of community participation within organisations, and in general.

As with other community sub-sectors, tenants and residents groups/neighbourhood based organisations are moving up the policy agenda; at two levels. Firstly in terms of service delivery and asset management (Quirk Review, 2007) and secondly, as key players in neighbourhood governance and the double devolution agenda (CLG, 2006). A more detailed discussion on these issues is available in the housing literature review in production by the Third Sector Research Centre.

The role and function of rural BTR activity

It has been argued that rural VCOs are crucial helping communities to manage demographic, social and economic change (Grieve *et al.,* 2007). Further they have been seen as organising around residential/housing issues, environmental issues, planning issues (including development plans), access to amenities, and employment and have been seen as largely middle class led (Abram *et al.,* 1996). The concrete aspects of community development in rural areas, such as employment and infrastructure, '*often come through local people changing attitudes, mobilising existing skills, improving networks, thinking differently about problems, and using community assets in new ways*' (Cavaye, 2001, p.2). Cavaye (ibid) believes that the role of voluntary and community work in rural areas is to cumulatively revitalise their economies through job creation and encouraging infrastructure work although little is known about whether there are any tangible differences between voluntary action within and between rural and 'peri-urban' areas other than rural groups receiving less funding than their urban counterparts (Blackburn *et al.,* 2003). Indeed it may be possible to question whether

arguments (Grieve *et al.,* 2007) about the focus and rationale for rural VCOs is actually different or distinctive from their urban and inner-city counterparts.

Faith based groups are said to play an essential role in rural voluntary activity (Grieve *et al.*, 2007). Activity associated with churches is common as church owned buildings are often the only communal facility available. Other research has focused upon the role of village halls in supporting the rural voluntary sector (Talbot 2008). While such resources are generally run by a committee their role is to manage the building and crucially, make it available for activities organized by local clubs and societies. Talbot found that most of the affiliated groups had a leisure focus, '*but also fulfilled implicit purposes of engaging with socially isolated people, and/or providing an educational or social service*' (p.2). While initially space was provided on the basis of mutual aid, in recent times it was common for groups to pay rent and for some diversification of provision to enable access to computing facilities, office equipment (e.g. photocopiers), administrative support and advice for local groups, and educational classes. The village hall personnel generally acted in an agency capacity to represent the needs of their communities, and make arrangements for activities to run on their premises. In some cases substantial services were being delivered by Village Hall Committees, their staff, or their volunteers, for example a gym for residents, a Credit Union, and youth clubs with professional youth workers.

Little, however, is known about the 'vertical' relationships between rural community action and local or regional structures of government (Edwards *et al* 2000; Ellis et al., 2004).

The role and function of cultural and arts based BTRs

Dodd *et al.* (2008) estimate that there are around 49,140 voluntary and amateur arts groups in England. Of these, it is unclear how many are 'below the radar'. Churchill *et al.* (2006) see the voluntary arts as a movement in which people take part voluntarily for enjoyment, community development, self improvement and social networking. Activities are largely self-financed, run by dedicated volunteers who are passionate about one particular art form, and take place as societies, clubs, and classes. Little is known in research terms about the role of formal cultural and arts based organisations let alone BTR activities in this field. The role and purpose will depend upon whether the creative activity has the purpose of aiding individuals in other areas of their life through the arts, such as art therapy for refugees, or whether it is for the purposes of the activity in itself and membership is entirely open. The former is more common, especially in smaller organisations. Either way, the role and function is to provide the opportunity for a group of people to get together, usually on a regular basis, and partake in some kind of cultural or arts based creative activity (Dodd *et al.,* 2008). Benns and Fox (2004) further divide the types of groups into art forms and activities, craft, literature, performing arts, visual arts, and cross-form; finding that performing arts represented over two thirds of all groups in their study area of Dorset and Somerset. Further research is needed about the wider roles of the arts sector in promoting wellbeing and helping to meet policy goals around cohesion and integration and place making.

For all the controversies in defining 'below the radar' organisations and activities, identifying their role(s) or, indeed, quantifying the number of such organisations there is a growing body of literature on the problems and challenges faced by small community based organisations (Rochester, 2000). The following sections of this paper examines common issues for groups referred to as below the radar and then explores (Rochester *et al*, 2000) if there are particular, nuanced, challenges which research indicates are faced by different 'below the radar 'sub-groupings'.

In terms of the challenges faced by, and pressures on below the radar organisations, most focus is upon issues of finance, a situation that may be exacerbated given the current economic climate. This section will first consider the challenges faced by the BTR sector as a whole and then move on to the specific sub-sectors.

Finance

A key focus of academic research in this field has been on funding for below the radar/community based organisations across the piece (Rochester *et al*, 2000, Kendall, 2003; Thompson, 2008). There are a series of emerging themes, drawing on the wider Third sector literature, of the impact of changing funding regimes which are directly relevant to below the radar groups and small community organisations. Firstly, whilst there is an emphasis in increasing their role in service delivery, it has been argued that pre-qualifying questionnaires and the criteria outlined in invitations to tender, around annual turn-over, fully audited accounts etc, actually excludes them from the commissioning or procurement process (BVSC, 2009) and that the system favours larger, long established voluntaries. Secondly, such small groups may either be ignorant of statutory funding opportunities (Blackburn *et al.,* 2003) or fail to understand often complex eligibility criteria (Garry *et al.,* 2006). Thirdly, writing about refugee and migrant organisation, Lukes *et al.* (2009) make a point which may be more generally applicable to below the radar groups:

> *The current trend in funding arrangements is increasingly pushing MRCOs towards structuring along standard mainstream principles to increase their chances of securing commissioned service delivery. This seems to create a dilemma for MRCOs since it is the case that, the more a MRCO becomes structured along mainstream standards the higher the likelihood that it erodes its nature and value as a grass-roots community initiative*
> (p.1)

Finally, Communities and Local Government (2009) note the increasing competition between ethnic minority communities for limited statutory funds and the extent to which they, along with other, particularly smaller, communities are disadvantaged by resource competition with established agencies.

Policy and influence

Given the increasing pressure on small organisations to be involved in policy and service delivery, there is little in the academic literature pointing to specific policies that are having an impact on BTR activities. Rather the focus is on a more general 'capacity' debate. A number of commentators have noted the lack of representation of BTR activities and organisations in policy arenas and the difficulties they have influencing policy. Thompson's (2008) research on small VCOs working in the children and

young people's sector, noted the difficulties groups had trying to gain influence, for example one of their informants stated

> 'small voluntary organisations are not always invited to consultation sessions and only hear about them in a roundabout way – again these tend to be held during the week – even after school is very difficult for us' (p.19).

Differentials in power between the '*institutional voluntary sector*' (on radar) and smaller, poorly resources community groups (often below the radar) were highlighted by Craig *et al.* (2002). In their research on compacts they asked how far the interests of community groups and BME groups were represented. While special codes of practice were developed to try to secure participation they found *'there was still some way to go…without adequate targeted investment in community development, it was unlikely that smaller groups would be in a position to contribute'* (p.18).

Government policy can influence the opportunities people have for setting up organisations, continuing their work, influencing decision making locally (or nationally), and what types of activities they engage with.

> 'The opportunity model predicts that the level of organisation will strongly depend on the structure of political institutions and the configuration of political power in a given society. Changes in the external opportunities or constraints on mobilization can spur or inhibit group action.' (Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005, p.828)

Thompson found 26% of organisations surveyed reported not being involved in any kind of influencing structure and those with incomes of less than £50k were much more likely to be in this group.

There are, however, some important nuances between various aspects of 'below the radar' groups, although finance is a constant theme.

Challenges for BME, refugee and migrant organisations

As with the wider community sector and, BTR activities, lack of funding is a pressure on RCOs. Griffith *et al.* (2005) suggest that some of the key themes raised in their research were the impact of short term funding on sustainability; increased competition for a shrinking pot of money; and increased bureaucratization of funding requirements. Some authors have suggested that funding opportunities were moving away from black or BME with an emphasis on delivering services to all communities through the same streams (McLeod *et al.,* 2001) and that where funding was being cut small BME organisations were more likely to lose their funds than mainstream organisations (Craig *et al.,* 2002). In more recent times the CLG Cohesion Guidance for Funders, although successfully challenged (Southall Black Sisters, 2008), has been particularly problematic for single identity ethnic organisations. Vergara *et al.* (2008) argue this guidance may '*have a devastating effect on the sector*' (p.24). The Big Lottery have commissioned research, currently underway, that is exploring the issue of single identity funding and the support needs of single issue groups in some depth.

Vergara *et al.* (2008) also note that *'our case study indicated that smaller and newly established BMEOs often had difficulties with meeting the 'track record' and quality standards associated with mainstream funding programmes.'* (p.58) In short BME organisations were often out-competed by white or well established organisations. Phillimore and Goodson (2010) find that new migrant led activities struggle more than established BME and general sectors because they lack the knowledge

of institutional cultures, funding regimes and monitoring that is inherent in longer established host community based activity. They and McLeod *et al* (2001) suggest that BME and RCO communities often lack individual social capital and are poorly linked to broader support and governance networks. In the wider BME sector partnerships that have successfully bid for funding were much less likely to have any black representation as BME VCOs have limited and inconsistent access to both equalities and generalist support (Vergara *et al.,* 2008). The BME sector were rarely invited to participate in consultations around the compact (Craig *et al.,* 2002) and as a result few were aware of its role and function.

A further dimension faced by RCOs is the UK Border Agency dispersal programme which dispersed asylum seekers away from existing language and population clusters in the south-east to regional cities without established communities. Dispersal policy led to the proliferation of RCOs outside London (Griffiths *et al.,* 2006, p.895). The possibilities of launching a RCO were *'limited and heavily dependent on the viability of own-community resources'* (p.895). Related to dispersal is the sheer complexity of issues faced by RCOs' client group. Without training RCO staff, themselves invariably volunteers with little or no knowledge of UK institutions, have to engage with a complex range of issues from mental health to education and for people from diverse backgrounds and with specific personal problems, such as a disability and in the face of language barriers and a lack of familiarity with British norms, systems and processes (Vergara *et al*, 2008; Phillimore *et al.,* 2007). Despite the surge in small RCO development in the regions (Phillimore and Goodson, 2010) most research has either focused upon London or on registered RCOs (Griffiths *et al.,* 2005). There has been no consideration of the role of MRCOs in overseas development despite the strong links maintained by new diasporas of forced migrants, some of whom may be planning to return to their countries of origin, if and when, it is safe to do so.

More broadly, Vergara *et al.* (2008) find the complex legislative changes relating to immigration and asylum in the UK since 1996 have created significant additional challenges to the refugee sector and the communication between the Home Office and RCOs is generally poor (Griffiths *et al.,* 2005). Leadership of RCOs can be particularly problematic. Several authors have written about the political infighting that can occur within and between groups (Phillimore et al. 2009; Griffiths et al., 2005). Echoing some of these points, Schrover and Vermeulen (2005) suggest that often immigrant organisations are '*plagued by internal friction, [are] sometimes ineffective towards host authorities and certainly [do] not represent entire immigrant communities*' (p.824). Similarly, Vergara et al. (2008) suggest that '*tension sometimes exists within and between different communities who may have been in conflict in their home countries. This can impact on the development of RCOs*' (p.83). In addition the representativeness of RCOs has been questioned and concerns expressed about the exclusion of women and sub-groups (Griffiths *et al* 2005). RCOs are also vulnerable because they are often led by asylum seeker volunteers who can be dispersed elsewhere, detained, deported or elect to move if they gain a positive decision, leaving a group leaderless and likely to fail (Phillimore *et al.,* 2004). However, Griffiths *et al.* (2006) also note that a deeper understanding these issues has rarely been developed in the literature.

Challenges facing arts and cultural groups

In contrast, the challenges and pressures for arts and cultural BROs are rarely external as they are generally highly self sufficient (Dodd *et al.,* 2008). However, challenges do exist and according to Dodd *et al.* (ibid) include access to good quality suitable venues at a reasonable cost and the upkeep of buildings used as a resource, not only for their group but for wider public benefit. Dodd *et al.* also note the difficulty of accessing money for new or additional activity which cannot be funded through membership fees or ticket sales. Planning and developing high quality creative activity, which meets the needs of members, may also be logistically complex, challenging and hard to finance as voluntary arts groups often do not fall within mainstream funding criteria. Application processes can be complex and time-consuming and funding may have provisions attached.

Other challenges which have been noted include attracting and retaining members. This applies particularly to recruiting members to volunteer for management, administrative, media/publicity tasks and deal with what has been seen as increasing bureaucracy and the complexities of compliance with legislation.

Dodd *et al* also comment on a 'forced' BTR status for such organisations. They report a common misconception that the voluntary and amateur arts are low quality. This results in smaller groups being overlooked by policy makers, funders and the broader charitable but professional/paid arts sector.

The absence of systematic research in this sector (Moseley, 2009) makes it difficult to examine challenges within and between types of groups or identify possible differences between rural and urban or wealthy and deprived areas engagement in arts activities, although it is likely that differences do exist.

Challenges and pressures for faith based BTRs

Harris (1998) argues that because the restrictions and prescriptions placed on members of religious associations they are not comparable to those of secular organisations and represent a specific case. However, this point is not developed and there is little in the literature on faith based VCOs which discusses the challenges and pressures specific to this part of the sector. Indeed, assertions that faith organisations constitute a distinctive part of the voluntary and community sector (Furbey et al, 2006) have been acknowledged as contentious (Edwards, 2008)

Such material as there is highlights the pressures on faith groups to engage in community cohesion policy implementation (Jochum et al., 2007) or engage in service delivery and other government driven agendas (Harris et al., 2007). This thrust is counter-balanced by reported suspicion of the motivations for faith groups' involvement in service delivery and local governance (Jochum et al., 2007). There are also pressures, often from within certain faith groupings themselves, to become more entrepreneurial in the management of buildings and assets (Ahmed et al., 2006) and anecdotal evidence of a growing number of faith based non-profit businesses such as the Jericho Foundation (www.jcp.org.uk).

Yet despite the increasing profile of faith groups in the policy arena, little academic research has been undertaken into the nature and effectiveness of inter-faith networks or their relationships with statutory and predominantly secular structures (Jochum *et al.,* 2007)

Challenges and pressures for rural BTRs

Cavaye (2001) identifies some of the challenges for small rural VCOs as being 'burn-out' amongst community leaders and volunteers who struggle to '*foster broader participation and shared vision*' and as with other BTR activity, inadequate resourcing. Opare (2007) writes that small community organisations are often weak in leadership and networking with other organisations; and that they are weakened by their lack of registration with official public agencies. For this author, these things can make organisations more sustainable and allow them to provide better services. Rural BTR activity may also suffer because of its rural nature. Many of the problems associated with rurality have been established in the rural geography literature (Gilg, 1996). In particular large distances between settlements, an aging population and lack of public transport may mitigate against participation and reduce the critical mass of population available to support third sector activity or increase pressures to offer services that are not provided by the state. Furthermore the lack of funds available to support activity in sparsely populated rural areas can mean that BTR groups struggle to attract resources. However, groups such as the Carnegie UK Trust (2009) are beginning to challenge perceived 'myths' around rural community action.

Below the radar: absences in the literature and contentious issues

In addition to the obvious questions around scope and scale of the sector there are some key gaps in the literature that need to be addressed if our understanding of BTR activity is to be expanded.

What does volunteering look like in BTR activities and organisations?

Much research into volunteering has focused upon larger organisations and formal volunteering schemes (Milligan and Conradson, 2006). Little is known about volunteering in BTR activities

> *'Researchers in the voluntary and community sector have traditionally tended to ignore grassroots, volunteer-led organisations and focus instead on larger organisations that are more immediately obvious. Relatively speaking, then, we know a lot about volunteering in larger, paid-staff organisations but comparatively little about volunteering within volunteer-led groups.'* (Ockenden and Hutin, 2008, p.6)

In the absence of detailed research, stereotypes remain of volunteers as predominantly white, middle aged and middle class. Much more community based information is needed about who volunteers in BTR groups, how they organise, what activities they undertake, the resources they bring to the sector, and the costs and benefits of volunteering both for volunteers and the beneficiaries of activities they contribute to.

What is the role and function of small arts and culture based activities?

The largest part of the BTR sector, arts, cultural and sports associations, is the least researched (NCVO, 2009). It has been argued that arts and cultural community activities have been dismissed as elitist and 'leisure based' and therefore not worthy of serious research. However there is a small but growing literature on the crucial role cultural activity at a grass roots level plays in regeneration and celebrating and sustaining the identities of minority and marginalised communities (Llewellyn, 2009).

At the current time there is no definitive picture of the type of people who may come into contact with cultural and arts based BTR activities in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, (dis)ability, wealth, employment status, or any other way of distinguishing types of people in society. That is not to say that some people are not more likely to be involved with certain groups than others. For example, it has been argued that men are more likely to be involved in woodwork classes than women, the middle aged middle classes more likely to be involved in Morris dancing than younger working class individuals (Dodd *et al.*, ibid).

What is the impact of BTR activity and organisations?

There is an apparent gap between policy assumptions about, and pressures on, below the radar groups. On the one hand, there is concern around the decline of civil society and social capital (Putnam, 2000). On the other, there is the emphasis on the development of small neighbourhood/community services as a more responsive and effective response to health, social care and welfare needs (Moseley, 2009). Yet very little is known about the impact of below the radar organisations in any of these areas.

How do BTR activities and organisations manage the tension between community needs and policy demands?

We have established that BTR groups and activities generally emerge from an individual's or group's desire to serve their own communities and that they are of interest to policymakers in a multitude of areas, in particular provision of services and integration and cohesion. Little is known about if, and how, the tensions between sensitivity to community needs, and meeting policy objectives and targets, are managed.

What is the role of technology in the BTR sector?

A number of groups could be described as 'below the technology radar'; those small groups without websites and who are not, therefore 'searchable'. On the other hand, it has been suggested that new social movements are particularly sophisticated in the use and new technologies to organise (Della Porta and Diani, 2009). Much less data is available on the use made by grass roots organisations to network and build 'virtual community' organisations (Smith and McCabe, 2009) or use ICT as a tool for lobbying for neighbourhood change (Richardson, 2008)

How are new migrant groups organising?

While there has been extensive consideration of the role of RCOs and BME organisations little research has been undertaken on the types of community and voluntary sector activity that new social groups are engaging in. Given the complexity of new migration and non-linear trajectories of migrants from Accession countries (Vertovec, 2008; Phillimore, 2009) they may be organising in new ways across country boundaries without geographic bases.

What inter-faith activity takes place and what is its role and function?

Equally limited, again despite the growing interest of policy makers, is research into inter-faith activities beyond those involved in broad based movements. Once again the literature on citizen, or community, organising is largely American.

How do BTR activities and organisations change over time?

There is virtually no longitudinal research into small community, BME, refugee and migrant organisations. The received wisdom is that such small groups in the third sector are transient, and therefore difficult to map and track. Yet this ignores long established arts and cultural groups or, for example, some 60 years of the county associations within the Irish community in England let alone other types of activity that may prevail at a micro-scale across the range of BTR activity.

Why do some groups choose to remain under the radar and what are the benefits of being off radar?

Much of the literature that does exist around BTR activity problemises size seeing small-scale action occurring as a result of lack of resources to enable growth. While some research into BTR, namely around RCOs has mentioned the desire to remain off radar, most research and policy literature assumes a trajectory from evolution to sustainability via registration and some kind of funding. However it is likely some groups do not wish to follow this trajectory while others seek to avoid it because they do not wish to come to notice. Such groups might include those with political affiliations or associated with illegal activity.

Conclusions

The starting point for the current paper was to review the available third sector literature on 'below the radar' organisations and activities. What emerges is that, although the term has entered the sector's vocabulary, the term itself rarely appears in research papers or journals. Where it does, BTR refers almost exclusively to those groups and organisations that do not appear on national data sets (MacGillivray *et al*, 2001) or have limited income (Thompson, 2008, CEFET, 2007). The terms used more commonly (Rochester *et al*, 2000, Craig *et al*, 2002. Banks *et al*, 2003, MCVO, 2009) are 'micro-charities', 'small', 'community' or 'informal/semi-formal' groups or organisations.

Yet, even when this wider terminology embracing the concept of a 'community sector' is included in an analysis of the literature, 'absence' is perhaps the key theme to emerge. There are substantial gaps in the research literature. Little, for example, has been written on arts, culture and sports in the third sector generally, let alone the role and impact of these volunteer led activities at a community level. Research has tended to focus on formal *organisation* rather than grass roots, informal or semi-formal, *activity*.

Further, within most of the subsets of activity examined in the current paper there is little or no consideration of the role of gender, ethnicity or class in community based organisation and activity. Yet, it is important to explore these dimensions and how they play out. Are there distinctive types of women or BME led organisations? Does social class influence the way that groups organise, they activities they undertake, issues they focus on – and ultimately the impact they have? Are rural groups substantially different from those active in urban areas – or is it that they address similar concerns, but in a different social, economic and cultural context? Developing a better understanding of voluntary 'activity' – as well as voluntary 'organisation' is therefore crucial to enhancing our knowledge of that *'loose and baggy monster'* (Kendal and Knapp, 1995) which is the third sector.

Building on the current literature review, future work in this area will predominantly focus on organisations or activities that are unregistered or not included on national databases. In terms of the research literature, these fall under existing definitions of being 'under the regulatory and financial radar'. These are likely to include types of community action that is not undertaken by organisations, but instead by entrepreneurs, individuals or activists. It may be that as further primary research proceeds, it indicates that the term BTR itself is of little use in understanding community based activity and action. Alternatively, other dimensions to being 'below the radar' may need to be explored further, for example visibility to funders, policy makers and third sector development agencies.

Problems of defining and therefore building a greater understanding and clarity about, BTR or community based activity is only one issue. The complexity and diversity of small scale activity in its current forms is a second, more substantial, challenge, given the gaps identified in the research literature. To this is added the task of identifying and scoping different and innovative forms of voluntary action and the development of new social movements and 'DIY community action.

In the current economic climate, and environment of rapid change within the third sector, it will be important to explore the extent to which 'under the radar activities' or small community groups offer organic solutions to many of the social ills associated with recession and projected cuts in public spending or become co-opted by the state, and are pushed towards, or actively collaborate with, formalisation in ways which prevent or inhibit grass roots community action (Dominelli 2006) particularly given Labonte's assertion (2005) that '*community groups transform the private troubles of support groups into public issues for policy remediation'.*

The 'below the radar' work stream at the Third Sector Research Centre will seek to address some of the gaps identified in this review of the literature through a series of longitudinal studies and discreet research projects.

End notes

[1] Community Interest Companies registered with the Regulator in Quarter 3 of 2008

[2] http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/uploadedFiles/NCVO/Events/Events_Archive/2008/Mohan%20et%20al.pdf

[3] http://www.rawm.org.uk/images/uploads/AN28_supplement.pdf

[4] http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/third_sector/assets/research%20paper%20chapter%204.pdf

[5] OTS (2008) Draft Guidance: National Survey of Third sector Organisations 'Under the Radar' Pilot

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About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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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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