



## Civil society

It's gone from the 'VCS', to the 'third sector', and now, increasingly, to 'civil society', but what's in a name? As the sector's definition is broadened, however, there is an inverse trend towards aggregation, says Ben Wittenberg

In 2006 the government renamed the 'voluntary and community sector' the 'third sector' because 'Office of the Voluntary and Community Sector and Social Enterprise' was too long and didn't make for a good acronym.

The 2008 edition of NCVO's *Almanac* recasts it as 'civil society', a phrase which has gained some traction among policy makers and commentators and looks set to be another addition to the ever growing sector-specific vocabulary I need to regularly translate for my non-voluntary sector friends.

Unlike the disappointment they feel when I explain that a portal is a website rather than a gateway to another dimension, or that a toolkit isn't a mechanical device for extracting donations, civil society is a little more complex a notion.

Now I'm not going to get into a semantic debate about what terminology we should use, or whether 'third' is better than 'voluntary and community' (it plainly isn't). What is of growing concern to me, however, is the way that the voluntary sector is under increasing pressure to aggregate, especially from government.

Strategic funding programmes, commissioning and contracting, the increasing drive for efficiency and savings, and impenetrable consultations all serve to condense financial relationships, policy input and related interactions to the lowest amount possible.

Why fund ten organisations when you can fund one and keep your costs down? Why ask 500 groups their opinion when you can ask their umbrella organisation and not have to worry about compiling all that feedback? The impact of this recent trend has been that much policy directed at the whole 'third sector' excludes huge proportions of it from the entire process.

Input from umbrella and membership organisations is, of course, crucial in helping to develop coherent and relevant policy, but by their nature such organisations cannot present the breadth of opinion held by their membership to government in a way it can understand and act upon. Even those that are Compact compliant fail to engage the relevant organisations on any

significant scale. The *Third Sector Review* consultation, billed as the blueprint for government's engagement with over 341,000 formally constituted organisations, received less than 300 written responses.

So will referring to 'civil society' make a difference? My initial reaction was that it would.

The term is so broad, so all encompassing, inclusive not just of charities and voluntary groups but universities, trade unions and political parties as well. Surely such a big tent would force greater clarity from policy makers and those influencing them. How could anyone refer to civil society delivering public services without then going on to explain that, actually, they mean registered charities and social enterprises with a turnover above £250k?

There is also a broader sense of aspiration about the phrase, that it is both the means and the end to which its myriad parts and people are working.

Of course the direct impact of that on most of the organisations now inside this big conceptual tent will be negligible. I asked four charity chief executives (none of them mine) what they thought about it and I got two pairs of rolled eyes, one resigned sigh, and a quite pointed "some people have far too much time on their hands", which I tried not to take personally.

The general message was that whether they are considered a part of the third sector or VCS or civil society is largely incidental to the work they do to support their beneficiaries; their major concern was whether they were likely to start seeing 'civil society' appearing on funding application forms.

Whether it becomes our new name, or just remains a broader classification beyond voluntary or third sector, remains to be seen, but at least for now it has created a different space for discussion about everything that isn't public or private sector, and how that sphere of social activity should be properly supported.

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Trend watch