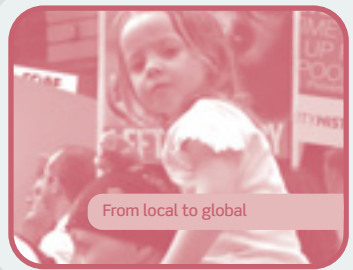


Engaging Citizens

current issues and findings



A summary of the NCVO/ESRC seminar series

ESRC Seminar Series
Mapping the public policy landscape



Foreword

Understanding the dynamics, behaviours and underlying motivations of citizen engagement continues to be a key challenge for public policy. Whether formal or informal, individual or collective, direct or mediated, the engagement of citizens is widely agreed to be fundamental to the health of UK democracy. However, the forthcoming publication of the Department of Communities and Local Government's Empowerment White Paper is indicative of ongoing concerns that citizens are not sufficiently engaged with the institutions and processes of democracy. Such questions extend to and include the role of voluntary and community organisations, where we still have much to learn.

This report, a summary of six seminars on citizen engagement and the role of voluntary and community organisations, identifies both questions and evidence that support and develop the debate. Based on presentations and discussions between academics, policymakers and practitioners, it synthesises different perspectives around engagement and in doing so it provides a rich seam of thinking for those new to or already interested in the debate.

I warmly welcome its publication, which demonstrates ESRC's expanding commitment to developing the third sector's evidence base. This now includes a major investment in a Third Sector research centre, which is well placed to take forward some of these issues. In the meantime, this publication also represents the fruition of an ongoing partnership between ESRC and NCVO that is committed to supporting the third sector and wider civil society to make policy and practice decisions informed by the highest quality evidence.

Stuart Etherington

Chief Executive

National Council for Voluntary Organisations

May 2008

Introduction

Engaging Citizens

From June 2006 until October 2007, practitioners, researchers and policymakers came together in a series of seminars entitled *Engaging Citizens* that were jointly organised by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The events were an opportunity to share new insights into how citizens are contributing, through engagement, to the construction of a society that is both inclusive and cohesive. They also: identified the ways in which positive differences are being made in communities; considered the impact of institutional and technological change on patterns of engagement; and examined other factors that lie behind individual choices, behaviours and attitudes.

The seminars were entitled:

Faith-based voluntary action

ICT, social capital and voluntary action

Individual pathways in participation

Localism and local governance

From local to global

Human rights, a tool for change

At each of the six seminars, two researchers presented the findings of research and work in their specialist field. This was followed by responses about policy and practice, questions and discussions – providing an opportunity for all participants to express opinions about the issues.

Purpose of this publication

This publication aims to summarise the six seminars by:

- highlighting key messages, findings and recommendations of each seminar
- identifying key issues for policy, practice and research across the series.

- 1 Faith-based voluntary action
- 2 ICT, social capital and voluntary action
- 3 Individual pathways in participation
- 4 Localism and local governance
- 5 From local to global
- 6 Human rights, a tool for change



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Each of the *Engaging Citizens* seminars was accompanied by a publication that provided further details on the issue presented by the researchers. For further information about these publications, please contact:

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Email: amanda.williams@esc.ac.uk

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The publications and presentations can also be downloaded from:

<http://www.ncvovol.org.uk/research/index.asp?id=2897# Events>

or

<http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/about/CI/events/esrcseminar/>

Engaging Citizens seminar programme

All of the seminars took place at NCVO in London and included:

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Faith-based voluntary action (June 2006)

Presenters:

Dr Vivien Lowndes, Professor of Local Government Studies, De Montfort University.

Greg Smith, Community Co-ordinator of the Salvation Army and former Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Institutional Studies, University of East London.

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ICT, social capital and voluntary action (October 2006)

Presenters:

Jayne Cravens, Coyote Communications and former Director of the UN Online Volunteering Service.

Dr Ben Anderson, Deputy Director, Chimera Research Institute, University of Essex.

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Individual pathways in participation (January 2007)

Presenters:

Dr John Annette, Professor of Citizenship and Lifelong Learning, Birkbeck College, University of London.

Dr Stella Creasy, Head of Research and Development, Involve.

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Localism and local governance (March 2007)

Presenters:

Marilyn Taylor, Professor of Urban Governance and Regeneration, University of the West of England.

Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Lecturer in social policy at the University of Liverpool.

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From local to global (June 2007)

Presenters:

John Gaventa, Professor and research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex.

Christopher Rootes, Professor of Environmental Politics and Political Sociology, University of Kent.

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Human rights, a tool for change (October 2007)

Presenters:

Katie Ghose, British Institute of Human Rights.

Stuart Weir, Professor at the University of Essex and Director, Democratic Audit.

Faith-based voluntary action

Context

In recent years, public policy has sought to encourage involvement of faith groups in the wider community and promote their contribution in civil renewal. There are a number of reasons for this, such as strengthening community cohesion, and the rationales for encouraging the involvement of faith-based groups are:



Normative – their values and identities have a role to play (linked to belief and enduring presence) in shaping people’s motivation for involvement in communities.



Resources – they offer a range of resources on which to draw, such as members’ skills, mobilisation of volunteers, staff and venues. In addition, they have an ability to reach socially excluded communities through their capacity to engage.

Governance – their faith leaders have a leadership role to play in representing their group, developing members’ skills and confidence to become actively involved and promoting understanding between different communities.

Tensions and challenges

The policy agenda for faith group involvement presents various tensions and challenges for both Government bodies and the groups themselves. The tensions and challenges can be categorised under five broad headings, and each includes a number of different issues:

Power

- Government bodies, such as local strategic partnerships, define the 'rules of the game'.
- Faith groups are disadvantaged by financial and legal power inequalities.
- Gaps exist in faith groups' skills and information (particularly managerial and technical skills).
- Faith groups are diverse; they are not a homogeneous entity.
- There are often distinctive, and sometimes exclusionary, beliefs and practices (eg restrictions on women's actions) within faith traditions.
- Government bodies have a 'target culture', which emphasises hard outcomes – rather than less easy to define soft ones.

Trust

- Government and local authority employees can often lack religious literacy and understanding.
- Faith groups can have a lack of policy literacy and understanding.
- Consulting faith communities and groups can be tokenism and rely on 'tick-box' approaches.

Faith

- Language differences may impede the involvement of faith groups.
- Keeping their faith separate from the social and community work that they undertake challenges faith groups.

Funding

- There is a reluctance of some local authorities to fund faith groups.
- There is a reluctance of some faith groups to apply for public money in case of 'mission drift' and loss of independence.
- Faith groups can be daunted by the complexities of funding processes.

Capacity

- It can be difficult for faith groups and faith leaders to balance their commitments.
- The accountability and legitimacy of faith groups requires strengthening.

Suggestions and recommendations

A number of suggestions and recommendations were highlighted during the seminar:

Voluntary and community organisations

- increase the range of opportunities to learn from each other, especially as faith groups share common issues with others in the voluntary and community sector.

Government, local authorities and statutory bodies

- promote training in policy and religious literacy
- provide support to build the capacity of faith groups and faith leaders (including their internal governance)
- map faith groups' potential for involvement in civil renewal.

All parties

- promote resource-sharing initiatives
- encourage informal dialogue as well as formal partnerships, and establish and keep under review clear protocols and guidelines for each project.

ICT, social capital and voluntary action

Context

Information and communication technologies (ICT), and especially the Internet, are changing the way in which individuals interact with each other. This is providing Government, and voluntary and community organisations with new opportunities for making connections.

The Internet has resulted in the development of online volunteering and the emergence of numerous online communities that bring together people in support of various causes and voluntary and community organisations. However, people do not generally substitute online volunteering or online communities for traditional volunteering and community action; online activities are usually only extensions of such activities and groups.

There is wide support for the idea that ICT-based community initiatives can increase social capital and improve people's quality of life. However, the evidence from research is less clear-cut. ICT does not necessarily increase the number of social ties; it is often complementary to other communication strategies used to maintain social contacts.





Tensions and challenges

While ICT may provide new opportunities for organisations and communities, it can also be disruptive and challenging, for example:

Voluntary and community organisations

- As the Internet and online communities grow, there is an increasing expectation that voluntary and community organisations should communicate in different ways with their volunteers, donors and beneficiaries.
- Others that do involve people online may overshadow voluntary and community organisations that ignore online communities and participants.
- Not engaging in online activities could be perceived as lacking transparency and grassroots input.

Community networks

- Issues of sustainability may lead to ICT community initiatives only having a short-term impact on social capital.
- ICT initiatives may lead to those already rich in social capital from benefiting the most.
- Top-down, centrally managed projects are prone to a range of problems. However, grassroots initiatives, supported from within the community, often draw heavily on existing social capital, which can be spent (as well as accrued) in keeping the initiative up and running. Burnout is a key issue.

Suggestions and recommendations

A number of suggestions and recommendations were highlighted during the seminar:

Voluntary and community organisations

- successful hosting of online communities has everything to do with people – the focus should *not* be on technology
- as the first priority, ICT community initiatives should consider developing or assuring the presence of social capital within communities before the introduction of a technology 'solution'
- ICT should not be used if it does not address community purposes; tools and frameworks should be created that enable individuals and communities to build the content they need and want.

Government, local authorities and statutory bodies

- ICT community initiatives should consider how access to free training and experimentation can be provided
- collaboration between grassroots initiatives should be encouraged to help the exchange of knowledge and experience
- sustainability should be encouraged through committed long-term, low-level, funding.

Individual pathways in participation

Context

Falling electoral turnout and trust in political structures and elected representatives is a cause for concern. A gradual shift from ‘Government’ to ‘Governance’ has led to innovations in local democracy (eg referendums, citizens’ juries and participatory budgeting) that provide the basis for a more deliberative democratic order. They provide new life-long learning opportunities for active citizenship.



However, despite these growing opportunities for participation at local level, people feel increasingly disconnected from the public realm. While people are in favour of increasing opportunities for civic participation, few actually take part. In addition, those who do take part are from similar social-economic backgrounds.



At the same time, people are increasingly turning their attention to social activism and to forms of collective action outside the traditional structures of civic engagement; yet there is no automatic connection between social activism and civic engagement. For example, high levels of interaction and concern about the physical, social and environmental conditions of a local housing estate, does not necessarily translate into participation in formal neighbourhood governance structures.



Tensions and challenges

The idea that volunteering and social activism will lead to civic engagement is questionable. The move from civil to civic participation may be hindered by a number of factors:

Participation gap

- People who are most likely to engage are those who have a high level of subjective empowerment and feel they can influence decision-making; they are less and less representative of the population as a whole.
- Increasing opportunities to participation may lead to some sections of the population having greater power over the public realm than others.

Disengagement

- There are practical barriers to participation, such as time constraints (eg balancing work and family commitments with the requirements of civic life), but there are also cultural and psychological barriers.
- Disengagement has taken place due to high levels of distrust and hostility towards politicians and public officials.

Local government

- Local authorities need to be willing and have the ability to move beyond consumer satisfaction and public consultation, to more deliberative and participatory approaches.
- Emphasis is needed on people, rather than structures and mechanisms; no matter how innovative some initiatives may be, people who feel unable to influence things often tend not to take part.

Skills and capacity

- Participation in governance structures and mechanisms requires a range of often quite specific and sophisticated skills, and this is especially true for community representatives.

Suggestions and recommendations

A number of suggestions and recommendations were highlighted during the seminar:

Voluntary and community organisations

- develop capacity building programmes for active citizenship and community leadership.

Government, local authorities and statutory bodies

- develop capacity building programmes for community representatives as well as local government officers
- shift priorities in local and national governance away from structural reforms to its mechanisms, towards securing institutional cultures that can support community engagement and empowerment
- promote service learning that provides a useful model for the establishment of learning opportunities that might be accredited.

All parties

- focus not necessarily on how people participate, but on why they do, or why they do not, participate
- understand the cultural and psychological perspectives that frame how the public view activism and the influence these have on civil and civic participation
- promote experiential learning or action-based research learning – over formal training.

Localism and local governance

Context

The localism agenda is creating new opportunities for people to become more actively involved in local decision-making structures and public services. New governance spaces have been created to reach all sections of the community including those that have not been engaged before. However, community activists and organisations remain marginalised within these new governance spaces.

While there has been a proliferation in mechanisms to bring decision-making closer to people, many public services are being reorganised into larger geographical units and, in consequence, are becoming more remote from those they seek to serve. People are being asked for their views on community issues at a local level. However, public service reform is driven by an assumption that only agencies serving larger geographical areas can be effective.



Tensions and challenges

The localism agenda presents a number of challenges for community activists and organisations, as well as for local authorities and statutory bodies:

Community activists and organisations

- The rules of engagement in new governance spaces tend to be made by the state. As a result, state actors generally come to these with inbuilt advantages; also opportunities for participation can overlap and present a confusing picture.
- The pace of policy change, driven from the centre, puts pressures on community partners and makes it more likely that few will engage.
- Structures and mechanisms require community actors who have a level of sophistication and experience. This excludes many and creates dependency on a limited number of key representatives.
- There can be difficulty in balancing the demands expected of community leaders and representatives, with the need to spread engagement more widely, ensure community views are fully canvassed and be accountable within the constituency.
- Community leaders and representatives have to balance participation in governance structures and mechanisms, with maintaining an independent voice and contribution.
- Communities are not homogeneous entities – making it difficult for community or neighbourhood representatives to fully reflect the diversity of their communities.

Local authorities and statutory bodies

- The community engagement agenda has been driven by central Government, but the responsibility is now largely being devolved at local level.
- Policy agenda emphasises the community leadership role of local authorities and ward councillors, but reconciling this with appeals for more direct citizen involvement is a major challenge.
- Local councillors are not always acknowledged and rewarded for their contribution.
- Many partnerships and governance spaces are citywide or at district level, however, local authorities and other public bodies are often not structured in a way that can easily operate at neighbourhood level.
- Some experienced voluntary and community organisations know more about what different departments within local authorities are doing and the opportunities that exist, than the state actors themselves.
- The media and residents have been slow to acknowledge the shift in local control that favours un-elected public bodies – to the detriment of local authorities (made up of members elected by the community).

Suggestions and recommendations

A number of suggestions and recommendations were highlighted during the seminar:

Voluntary and community organisations

- identify the main agencies of control, such as those that control and have power over public spending, and the main agents of change within institutions
- combine insider and outsider strategies to gain influence
- build alliances to strengthen influence.

Government, local authorities and statutory bodies

- reduce programmes of continuous reform from the centre
- ensure 'joined-up' thinking and developments that are mutually supportive.

All parties

- support local democratic systems and acknowledge alternative forms of local engagement
- keep pace with the changes that have occurred in the 'local democracy mix', particularly in terms of local campaigning and activism
- support 'neighbourhood champions' – instead of dismissing them as 'the usual suspects'.

From local to global

Context

As the shift in governance structures continues, people are coming together at local and global levels to address concerns that are held worldwide. These actions are not just restricted to affluent people in the North, but are embraced by actors from across the world that devise strategies and initiatives to tackle issues of global impact.



As power comes in many forms, guises and levels, there is a need for organisations in civil society and activists to understand the changing nature of governance and accountability. This requires an understanding of the interactions between local, national and global forms of power – and how each impacts upon the other.

Advances in, and the proliferation of, communication technologies are helping redefine the stage upon which the actors play out their roles and are enhancing international reach, engagement and mobilisation. However, despite the benefits of communication technologies, face-to-face contact and real interaction, locally, nationally and globally still play crucial roles in achieving objectives.



Tensions and challenges

In mobilising local, national and global initiatives, voluntary and community organisations, other civil society organisations and activists, are faced with a number of tensions and challenges:

- Globalisation and the changing nature of governance add new complexities to power relationships between actors.
- Political power is not only in the state arena, but is to be found in quasi-state and non-state spaces – considerably broadening where attention should be focused.
- Increased participation in itself does not alter power; nor does it change the status quo.
- Invited spaces offer some possibilities for influence, but it is questionable whether they actually create opportunities for any real long-term change on critical issues.
- Potential imbalances and tensions between North and South due to, for example, differences in resources and perspectives, present challenges for the design of local/global coalitions and require resolution through democratic negotiation and organisational structures.
- Social movements are still relatively un-institutionalised and operate through informal networks and, despite advances in communication and travel; the idea of 'global citizenship' has not yet fully developed.
- As there is no global state, developing truly global movements and organisations is difficult; as a result, they become influenced by specific national cultures, political systems, cultures and timetables.

Suggestions and recommendations

A number of suggestions and recommendations for **voluntary and community organisations, other civil society organisations** and **activists** were highlighted during the seminar:

- understand implicit forms of power (eg how spaces for engagement are created and the levels of power that are in place) in explicit terms to assist decision-making
- achieve global citizen action by acting at multiple levels (local, regional, national and international) and by building vertical alliances – strengthened by horizontal cross-border networks and partnerships
- embrace a diversity of approaches and outcomes for effective global citizen action
- strengthen actions through research, policy analysis and organisational learning
- ensure internal forms of governance are participatory, transparent and accountable
- build upon recent successful actions of neighbourhood groups – as public engagement with global issues is strong
- avoid reflecting and promoting the interests of the North in order to build bridges between North and South.

Human rights, a tool for change

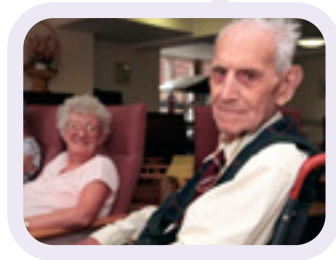
Context

The UK has a long reputation for fair play and tolerance. It must therefore come as a surprise to find that the country lags behind others in its commitment to full human rights. Injustice and abuse in some sections of the community are still prevalent; this is despite human rights belonging to everyone, including those in reduced circumstances, the vulnerable and those in society who ‘fall below the radar’.

Human rights are intended to guarantee that people lead their lives in dignity, that they are treated with fairness and respect, and that it is possible for them to participate in matters that have an impact on their lives. In the UK, the Human Rights Act 1998 is a major tool for change in society. The challenge for all of us is to establish how human rights can enhance community engagement, build social cohesion and ensure equality while protecting our individual freedoms.

Even though our political and civil rights are enshrined in law in the UK, there remains a case for economic, social and cultural rights to be acknowledged in law too. This would help eliminate groups in society who continue to lack dignity and self-confidence in the way that they can conduct their lives. Ultimately, we all need to be aware of our human rights and that we each hold a responsibility to respect other people’s rights too.





Tensions and challenges

In ensuring human rights have a role to play in the lives of all in the UK and help revive democratic processes, improve services and promote social cohesion; there are a number of challenges and tensions to be faced:

- The Human Rights Act protects civil and political rights, but plays a limited role in protecting economic, social and cultural rights.
- A culture of respect for human rights is not in place in the UK – public services lack confidence in them, voluntary and community organisations have yet to embrace them, public awareness is low and the press can be hostile to the outcome of their application.
- Human rights tend to be viewed in the UK in strictly legal terms.
- Examples of how people are using the Human Rights Act 'beyond the courtroom' to change their lives for the better are encouraging. But these alone will not bring about a complete culture of respect; change needs to be all pervasive – at individual and organisational levels.
- Civil and political rights may not always be the main priority of Government and private organisations if it is thought that they could be detrimental to a political agenda or commercial interests – such as detention of those suspected of terrorism, or stifling public protest about an infrastructure development.
- Current law only protects people against abuse by public bodies, but not by private or voluntary and community organisations providing services or functions.

Suggestions and recommendations

A number of suggestions and recommendations were highlighted during the seminar:

Voluntary and community organisations

- design practical tools to enable the voluntary and community sector to integrate human rights into both its service delivery and campaigning roles
- make use of requirements under the Human Rights Act 1998 to ensure state and public bodies meet their obligations to be accountable for the treatment of individuals and the development of society.

Government

- remove the powerlessness of some groups in society by introducing economic, social and cultural rights, and therefore ensure more equitable participation in decision-making in society – especially for people who are usually marginalised and excluded.

All parties

- develop a new discourse about human rights in the UK that emphasises their importance in improving public services and in enabling people to participate fully in society
- use human rights approaches as tools for tackling inequality in society
- ensure the involvement and empowerment of service providers and users in identifying how human rights can make a difference to their work and lives
- acknowledge that with the use of human rights based approaches, process is just as important as outcome.

Key issues for policy, practice and research

There were a number of key issues that emerged during the course of the seminar series:

A growing emphasis on citizen engagement

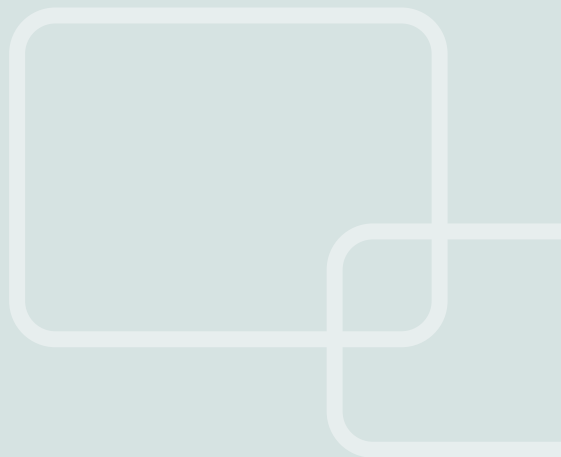
- The shift from 'Government' to 'Governance' that is currently taking place is creating new opportunities for people to become more actively involved in decision-making.
- The changing nature of governance highlights the complexity of power relationships between different players.
- Initiatives to extend citizen engagement are taking place at local, national and global levels, and there are lessons to be learnt from what is happening in other countries.

A multiplicity of spaces and processes

- The pace of policy change and the proliferation of mechanisms to bring decision-making closer to people have put pressure on those who engage.
- The arena for decision-making has broadened. However, the rules of engagement in new governance spaces (such as Local Strategic Partnerships) still tend to be made and controlled by the state.
- In order to engage and influence, voluntary and community organisations as well as other civil society activists need to think strategically about where they want to engage and who they want to engage with.
- Working collaboratively with other organisations and establishing networks offers the potential for enhancing influence, reach and mobilisation.
- Collaborating and networking are equally the case for ICT, which is changing the way individuals and organisations interact with each other.

Engagement dependent on capacity and motivation

- Effective engagement requires access to information, skills and resources.
- Structures and processes of engagement often require a high level of sophistication and experience. This excludes many people and creates dependency on a limited number of key individuals.
- There are still significant inequalities in engagement and a lack of diversity. Those who are most likely to engage are those who already have high levels of social and human capital.
- There is a danger that those who engage become increasingly less representative of the population as a whole.
- People's willingness to engage and their sense of empowerment (or powerlessness) is partly shaped by values and beliefs. Trust, or the lack of trust, in institutions or organisations is equally a determining factor.



Questions of legitimacy

- Community leaders and representatives have to deal with competing demands. It can be difficult for them to balance diverging commitments.
- Community representatives and voluntary and community organisations have to balance participation in governance structures and mechanisms, with the need to spread engagement more widely and maintain an independent voice.
- Communities are not homogeneous entities, so fully reflecting the diversity of their communities is a major challenge for community representatives and voluntary and community organisations.
- To strengthen their legitimacy, voluntary and community organisations need to ensure internal forms of governance are participatory, transparent and accountable.
- A human rights based approach can help combat inequality and injustice, through the use of methods that promote participation, accountability and empowerment.

Understanding engagement and power relationships

- Despite our knowledge of barriers to engagement, they remain persistent. A better understanding is needed of who engages, why and how. Much could be learnt from looking at the diversity of people's experience and perception of engagement, including those who do not engage.
- The emphasis should be on people rather than structures, mechanisms and technologies. No matter how innovative some initiatives may be, people who feel unable to influence things often tend not to take part.
- Power increasingly comes in many forms, guises and levels. Both globalisation and changing governance are challenging our understanding of power and received wisdom of where and how voluntary and community organisations and activists should focus their attention.

Research opportunities

Possible areas of research emerging from the seminar series included:

- map faith groups' involvement in local civil renewal for a better understanding of the role they currently play, and could play in the future
- determine to what extent ICT can be used to increase social ties and cohesion in communities
- investigate the extent to which social activism leads to civic engagement, such as the factors that encourage and hinder transition, and determine how the transition shifts the power base in the public domain
- investigate the cultural and psychological perspectives that frame how the public view activism and the influence these have on civil and civic participation
- determine the extent to which consolidating public services into larger geographical areas really does lead to more effective services, and study how effectively they are able to respond to local differences and concerns expressed by communities
- identify the main agencies of control in communities (eg power of public spending and agents of change)
- investigate (in studies of global movements and campaigns) all implicit forms of power to provide an explicit understanding, and analyse policy locally, nationally and globally to consider its implications for voluntary and community organisations
- establish how human rights based approaches can enhance community engagement, build cohesion and ensure equality.

Further Information

Centre for the Third Sector

The seminar series was a precursor to the establishment of a new, independent and multidisciplinary research centre for the Third Sector. The centre, announced in January 2008, is an initiative of the ESRC, the Office of the Third Sector (part of the Cabinet Office) and The Barrow Cadbury Trust. It will bring together a critical mass of research expertise, resources and intellectual leadership; it will aim to:

- support research of the highest international standing
- provide top quality analysis
- strengthen the evidence base on the sector and its impact to underpin policy and practice.

The centre will help develop partnerships between researchers and research users and increase knowledge, engagement and expertise about, for and with the Third Sector. To this end, it will engage with the voluntary and community sectors, and also with social enterprises.

Further announcements about the Centre for the Third Sector will be made in due course.



The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's leading research and training agency addressing economic and social concerns. It aims to provide high quality research on issues of importance to business, the public sector and Government. The issues considered include economic competitiveness, the effectiveness of public services and policy, and our quality of life.

The ESRC is an independent organisation, established by Royal Charter in 1965, and funded mainly by Government.

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The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) is the umbrella body for the voluntary sector in England. It works to support the voluntary sector and to create an environment in which voluntary organisations can flourish. It represents the views of the voluntary sector to policymakers and Government and consults with the sector to inform policy positions on issues generic to the sector. It also carries out in-depth research to promote a better understanding of the sector and its activities. NCVO has a growing membership of over 5,700 voluntary organisations, ranging from large national charities to small local community groups.

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