

Helping to map the foundations of a ‘Big Society’

August 3 2011

With the government’s ‘Big Society’ policies laying great stress on the capacities and resources of communities, University of Southampton researchers are conducting research and establishing substantial new data resources, to build a picture of how communities might fare under new policies.

Working as part of the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC), Southampton researchers are bringing together a wide range of evidence to analyze the uneven capacity of communities, and are seeking to relate these patterns to underlying social and economic conditions.

Professor John Mohan, from the University of Southampton and Deputy Director of the TRSC, says: “Research on registered third sector organizations operating at neighborhood scale, for example, shows that there are fewer organisations per head in more deprived areas. Those organisations operating in more deprived areas are also more likely to be reliant on public funding. The research also shows the areas with fewest registered third sector organisations are also likely to be in areas most at risk from funding reductions.”

Volunteering is another area where TSRC is making an innovative contribution, by exploring the relationship between different forms of engagement and tracking people over time. The research found that there is not a major problem of non-engagement; most people do some combination of volunteering, giving money, or participating in community organizations, even if they don't do so at every stage of their

lives.

However, there are a small number of people, termed the ‘civic core’, that contribute the majority of time and money to voluntary organizations. For example, 31 per cent of the population provides around 90 per cent of hours of unpaid help, four-fifths of money donated to charities, and 70 per cent of civic participation.

This civic core is more likely to be middle-aged, have higher education qualifications, own their house, practice a religion, and lived in the same neighborhood for over 10 years. Crucially, those groups who are more active tend to be living in the most prosperous parts of communities rather than the most deprived. Professor Mohan says: “This calls for creative thought about how we match community needs, with people who have the time and resources to contribute voluntary effort.”

Professor Mohan further explains that TSRC is establishing the resources to allow new analytical work, which hasn’t been done before. He adds: “We’ve put substantial effort into drawing together over 15 years’ data from the Charity Commission register. This gives us an unrivalled ability to track changes over time in the growth, establishment and dissolution of organizations. Part of the Center’s role is to take a long view of data needs. Researchers will find that dataset increasingly useful as it builds up over time.”

These figures come from quantitative analysis of registered third sector organisations and national survey datasets. A criticism of these is that they miss out informal volunteering or small community-based groups. However, TSRC is also actively looking at how to research such ‘below the radar’ activity. Professor Mohan says: “That’s the advantage of a large national research centre, which contains a broad interdisciplinary mix of academics. The Centre’s quantitative work programme is complemented by a range of qualitative research projects which puts

flesh on these somewhat dry statistical bones.”

TSRC is inviting people to discuss findings from across their research streams at a major conference on 14 October at the British Library.

More information: [www.tsrc.ac.uk/NewsandEvents/E ...
bid/825/Default.aspx](http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/NewsandEvents/E...bid/825/Default.aspx)

Provided by University of Southampton

Citation: Helping to map the foundations of a ‘Big Society’ (2011, August 3) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-08-foundations-big-society.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.