

“So Many Tiers, So Many Agendas, So Many Pots of Money”: The Challenge of English Regionalization for Voluntary and Community Organizations

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Abstract

This paper looks at the challenges facing voluntary and community organizations (VCOs) within the new policy context of English “regionalism”, drawing primarily on an empirical study in one of the emerging Regions. Barriers to voluntary and community sector (VCS) engagement with the new regional governmental organizations and the new regional policy agenda are identified. The role of VCS “infrastructure” organizations in facilitating relationships with regional levels of government is also considered. The concepts of exchange, ownership, trust and legitimacy are then employed to analyse and explain the implications for English VCOs of working with a new tier of government at regional level. The paper concludes by reconsidering the nature of the relationship between VCOs and “government” in the light of the new policy context presented by English regionalism combined with central government interest in building the capacity and infrastructure of the voluntary sector.

Keywords

Regional government; Voluntary sector; Funding; Capacity

Introduction

The relationship between government and VCOs (voluntary and community organizations) has been an enduring topic in the field of social policy and administration. Since the establishment of the welfare state, the relative contributions that government and VCOs make to welfare provision have been the subject of numerous empirical and theoretical studies (for example, Glennerster 1995; Hatch 1980). Most recently, the role of the “third” sector in policy-making, as well as in direct service provision, has been increasingly recognized (Harris *et al.* 2001; Taylor and Warburton 2003).

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Scholars and policy-makers have conceptualized the relationship between government and the voluntary sector in a variety of ways. Some have distinguished between a complementary, supplementary and innovatory role for the sector in relation to government agencies (Alcock 2003; Brenton 1985), while more recent understandings of the relationship have employed concepts such as contracts, markets, partnership, collaboration and governance (Craig *et al.* 2002; Daly 2003; Deakin 1996; Glendinning *et al.* 2002; Lewis 1994; McDonald 2002). In the last twenty years researchers have also become increasingly interested in the way in which changing government policies can impact upon the administration, management and organization of VCOs (Harris *et al.* 2002; Scott and Russell 2001).

Up to now, impact studies of this kind focused on the challenges posed for VCOs by the policies and activities of national and local governmental agencies. However, the current trend to devolution within the UK means that there is now an emerging additional tier of government with which VCOs must engage. In England this new tier is at the “regional” level.

The emergence of a new and additional tier of government in England raises questions about the relationship between that tier and VCOs. Will the relationship be similar to that found in earlier studies focused on the relationship between VCOs and central and local governmental organizations? What issues are VCOs facing as the new tier of government develops and the constitutional context changes? Do the challenges demand new ways of thinking about the government/voluntary sector relationship? This paper provides initial answers to these questions drawing on a recent empirical study in one of the new English Regions.

Background

The new English “regionalism” can be seen as part of a broader programme of policy change within Britain under New Labour. The intention is to incrementally devolve governmental power and decentralize administration from central government structures based in London, to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and English “Regions” (Labour Party 1996; Pearce and Mawson 2003).

There are currently nine designated English Regions.¹ There are some variations between them in their structures,² but in general each has its own “Government Office” staffed by civil servants outposted from central government departments and its own Regional Development Agency (RDA) which is appointed by, and accountable to, national government ministers. RDAs are intended to be drivers of regional economic performance. Each Region also has its own “Assembly”. In London devolved political powers have already been granted to the Assembly as well as to a mayor. None of the other Regions have elected Assemblies yet so, outside of London, the regional assemblies have the status still of *embryonic* regional governing bodies; however, they also have strategic planning and coordination responsibilities.

At the moment, then, England is constitutionally in a transitional period. Regional government is not *formally* in place (except in London) but Government Offices, RDAs and Assemblies are in existence and there are, additionally,

a range of regional activities taking place. A variety of regional policies are being developed and new organizations are being established at the regional level by the business and VCO sectors. There is also a proliferation of co-ordinating and consultative bodies which draw together organizations within and across sectors.

There is a small but steadily growing body of research analysing the policy and management implications of this new regionalism (for example, Ayres and Pearce 2003; DETR 2000). But there has been no research to date which focuses on the emerging role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) within the context of regionalization. Nor have there been studies which look at the organizational implications for VCOs of this constitutional change. Yet, the incremental implementation of English regionalism since 1997 has raised questions for VCOs about how to operate within a totally new policy context and, more specifically, about how to relate to the emerging regional governmental structures and the new regional policy agenda (NCVO 2000). It is these questions which are the focus of this paper.

The Challenge for English Voluntary and Community Organizations

Few English VCOs, up to now, have been organized on a regional basis; where they have been, their internally designated regions have been geared to their own service and funding needs. This reflects the realities of governmental policy-making and funding sources in which power and responsibility have been located primarily at the national and local levels (Balloch and Taylor 2001; Harris 2001). Similarly, the “intermediary” or “infrastructure” bodies of the voluntary and community sector, which have traditionally attempted to draw together the views and interests of VCOs within geographical areas, have, again up to now, worked mostly at the local and national levels (Lansley 1996; Osborne and Tricker 1994).

Just as the move towards regionalism raises questions for English VCOs about whether and how to relate to the regional governmental tier; so those who work in the new regional governmental structures face the obverse question. They are obliged to consult with, and take account of, the views of local citizens and special interest groupings within their regions (Ayres and Pearce 2002); yet at the start of New Labour’s regionalization project there were no obvious organizational mechanisms through which to achieve this.

In response to this two-headed question, new voluntary-sector “infrastructure” organizations were formed within each of the English Regions at an early stage of the regionalization process. These regional VCO “networks” (VSNs) are themselves mostly associations of pre-existing local infrastructure organizations such as Councils for Voluntary Service and Rural Community Councils; that is, they are “networks of networks” rather than networks of individual VCOs. The intention is that these regional voluntary sector “networks” (alongside specialist regional organizations of the black and minority ethnic voluntary sector) should provide the organizational means through which VCOs within each Region can engage with regional governmental structures and the regional policy agenda (Spencer *et al.* 2001). These

networks are also expected to facilitate “partnership” working across the boundaries between the VCO, business and public sectors.

The study described in the next sections of this paper explored questions raised by these new arrangements and the new policy context for the voluntary sector. What, for example, are the views of local VCOs on how they are, and how they should be, linked into the regional governmental structures and how they should respond to the related regional policy agenda? Do the new regional voluntary and community sector networks (VSNs) have the capacity to engage with the new regionalism? What problems and issues do local VCOs and regional VSNs face in relationships across the VCS/governmental sector boundaries at regional level? In short, what are the implications for VCOs of the new English regionalism?

The Study

The study was carried out in one of the new English Regions (hereafter referred to as “the region”) which has a population of more than 5 million. It includes a major conurbation around its principal city as well as substantial rural areas.

Conducted in 2001, four years after the start of the implementation of English regionalism in 1997 and one year after the formation of the Region’s own regional VSN (referred to hereafter as the “Regional Network”), the aim of the research was to uncover the perspectives of local VCOs and voluntary-sector infrastructure organizations (local, subregional and regional) on a range of topics including:

- their experiences of engaging with regional governmental organizations and the regional policy agenda;
- the skills and resources needed by the voluntary and community sector to enable it to engage with regional governmental organizations and the regional policy agenda; and
- the current and future role of regional network organizations in cross-sector working and linking VCOs to the regional structures and regional policy agenda.

As this was an exploratory study and the first of its kind, we used a qualitative approach and conducted 41 semi-structured telephone interviews. Some 34 interviews were with representatives of local, subregional and regional voluntary and community sector infrastructure organizations. These organizations were chosen to reflect the geography of the Region, as well as the pattern of voluntary and community sector (VCS) activity across the area. Five of the 34 had a predominantly regional focus; 16 covered metropolitan areas; while the remaining 13 worked in rural or mixed urban/rural localities. Seven interviews were conducted with representatives of regional businesses and regional governmental organizations, including the Regional Assembly, the Government Office for the Region, the Regional Development Agency and the Regional Business Policy Group. All interviewees were senior members of their respective organizations (i.e. CEO or assistant-CEO

equivalent) who were identified in advance and who agreed to be interviewed on a specific date.

In addition to the 41 interviews, questionnaires asking about their understanding of the regional agenda and knowledge of the work of regional bodies were distributed to 80 individual local voluntary and community groups operating in two discrete parts of the region—one urban and one rural. Of the 21 that completed a questionnaire, 9 were from the urban area (a response rate of 20 per cent) and 12 from the rural area (34 per cent response). Because of the poor response rate to the questionnaires, the findings reported here rely most heavily on the data obtained from the qualitative interviews with the 41 senior respondents. The data collected were analysed thematically, using a system of open coding of the interview transcripts and completed questionnaires. These codes were then analysed in relation to each other, resulting in the study findings which are presented in the next section of the paper.

We refer in this paper to the people interviewed and to those who completed questionnaires as “interviewees” or “study participants”. We refer to voluntary and community sector infrastructure or network organizations as “VSNs” and individual local voluntary and community organizations as “VCOs”. Unattributed quotations (shown in italics) come from study participants. We use the shorthand term “regional agenda” to refer to the range of policies and structures relating to the new English Regions.

The Study Findings

Experience of the new regional agenda

Few study participants had positive experiences of regionalism, while many seemed detached or confused—if not actually antagonistic.

Many VSN interviewees admitted to some degree of confusion about the nature of regionalism, about who the key players are and what their role comprises. Awareness within individual VCOs was often even more limited; many study participants had not heard of regionalization. Among those who *were* aware of regionalization, it was mostly seen as being something imposed by national government in a top-down manner and as an agenda “*driven by established economic thinking*”. Its main interest for the VCS was seen to be the opportunities presented for involvement in community and economic development programmes (principally regeneration) and the opportunities for funding more generally: “*the region is increasingly a source of money.*” Allocation of European Union funding on a regional (rather than national or local) basis was considered to be a significant opportunity for the voluntary and community sector: “*the major source of funding for regeneration-related activity*”.

Although VSN study participants generally thought that regionalism would have an impact on their members in the near future (if not already), very few were actively involved in regional issues at the time of the study. Where they were involved, it was generally in a reactive mode; responding to surveys or attending consultation meetings, for example. People described their engagement as “*a bit detached*”, or “*very limited so far*”. Among the VCO

participants, two-thirds of the urban VCOs said that they were involved in regional issues, compared with only one-third of the rural VCOs.

Few VSN participants described their own experiences of engagement with the regional agenda in entirely positive terms: “*useful and positive, but also problematic*” was a common refrain. The main areas of frustration related to the complexity of regional structures—“*so many tiers, so many agendas, so many pots of money*”—and to the amount of jargon used. Another major frustration, particularly for those based outside the metropolitan areas, was the perceived urban focus of the regional agenda. These feelings of frustration were heightened for some of those involved by the fact that they had not yet experienced any tangible benefits from the Region.

Perceptions of the regional agenda as dominated by governmental interests, as preoccupied with economic issues rather than social issues, as predominantly urban-focused, as described in language that is complex and jargon-ridden—all of these limited VSN participants’ willingness to spend time getting involved. This was linked with the feeling expressed by several participants that the regional agenda is “*someone else’s agenda*”, being conducted on what is “*not quite a level playing field*” under rules that the voluntary and community sector had little role in making.

Barriers to voluntary and community sector engagement with the Region

Time was seen by VSN interviewees as a major cost of engagement, usually outweighing any benefits. This point applied not only to time for attending meetings but also to time for responding to consultative documents. The feeling of time constraint was aggravated by the awareness that effective involvement in regional governmental organizations requires commitment, persistence and continuity: “*you can’t dip in and out and go to two or three meetings a year*”.

Many of the VSN interviewees referred to difficulties experienced in balancing the need to respond to demands at the local level with the emerging need to be involved additionally with the regional tier. Even those from organizations with a specific regional brief found it difficult to devote sufficient resources to the regional agenda; either their agency was small compared to the breadth of issues to be addressed, or staff had other responsibilities in addition to regional roles. Lack of organizational flexibility in many small VCOs compounded these difficulties of lack of organizational capacity. Local VCOs are usually set up with specific purposes, often funded under arrangements which do not allow them to divert too far into other areas of work: “*project funding ties staff to particular roles and work and that has to be given priority; unless regional work is resourced it cannot be done*”.

Again the rural/urban issue emerged as a barrier to engagement, with VSN interviewees from rural locations expressing the view that they and those they worked with were being marginalized: “*The regional agenda tends to be very much an urban agenda—it is rare to see rural organizations at regional meetings, and those that are involved have to continually fight against urban dominance. People from urban-based agencies work more closely with regional bodies, know each other and have developed trust. It is very difficult for others not in that position to join in a meeting, because they do not feel they are operating at the same level.*”

Among the local VCOs, similar problems emerged. Urban VCOs ranked “time” as the highest barrier to involvement, followed by “money” and “availability of staff”. The rural voluntary organizations also ranked “time” as being the major barrier followed by “availability of staff”, “location of meetings” and “money”.

Some barriers identified were essentially about the difficulties experienced in working across the voluntary/government sector boundary. A common complaint was that the voluntary and community sector was not treated on an equal basis with public and business sector bodies: “Public sector organizations tend to pay lip service to the voluntary and community sector” and “the public and private sectors do not acknowledge the voluntary and community sector as an equal partner”. Some VSN interviewees also felt that the governmental sector generally sees the voluntary and community sector primarily as a service provider, and does not acknowledge its potential contribution to policy-making.

The most common concern expressed by governmental interviewees was that there were different perceptions within the various sectors about each other’s interests in the regional agenda, and that these had not been subject to any joint exploration or consideration. For instance, it was suggested that the voluntary and community sector and local government are primarily interested in “supporting regeneration—measures to deal with deprivation, focusing on the unemployed and their needs, including access to public transport”. In contrast, the business community, it was felt, is “interested in focusing on the mainstream regional economy, people in employment and their needs, which are mainly about improving accessibility by road”.

Facilitating voluntary and community sector engagement

How could these barriers be overcome? The data suggested four measures which could facilitate VCS engagement with the regional agenda and regional governmental structures in the future. Two of the measures relate to the voluntary sector itself and two to issues about working across the VCS/governmental sector boundary: increased organizational capacity; expanded knowledge and skills; accessible meetings; and developing mutual understanding.

(i) *Increased organizational capacity in VSNs and VCOs.* Several VSN participants felt that their own organization’s capacity to engage with the regional agenda and regional organizations could be improved through the employment of staff with a specific brief to work at the regional level. Employing staff with a strategic rather than narrow service delivery brief and having board members who recognized the need to devote resources to engaging at the regional level, were also both thought to be important. Individual VCOs generally concurred with these ideas, stressing additionally the need for more information about the *benefits* of engagement with the regional agenda.

(ii) *Expanded knowledge and skills in VSNs and VCOs.* There was widespread agreement among VSNs that while local VCOs remain largely ignorant of the regional agenda and its potential relevance to their work, the larger,

better-resourced and predominantly urban-based VCOs will remain the main VCS players at regional level. As one VSN participant put it, the regional agenda “needs to be brought to a level which is meaningful to the various neighbourhoods in our town . . . This would assist in bringing regional issues to the attention of local communities and feeding their views into the regional agenda”.

In addition to increased understanding of regionalism and the regional policy agenda itself, study participants pointed to the need for VCOs and VSNs to acquire knowledge about regional structures, how government works, the respective roles of the different regional bodies and the wider political context. They also thought that much more could be done to train VCOs in skills relevant to inter-organizational collaboration, such as negotiation and communications skills, and the ability to think strategically, beyond the level of one’s own organization.

(iii) *More accessible regional-level meetings.* Study participants offered a number of insights about the subtle way in which the organization of meetings can discourage VCOs from engaging with regional bodies and the regional agenda. For example, many VSN interviewees felt that meeting arrangements presented barriers to VCOs and VSNs based outside of the main urban area of the Region. Those whose agencies had a high degree of board or volunteer involvement also felt that meetings should be held outside of regular work hours so that non-employees could be more involved. Dedicated funding was needed to cover the travel costs of attending regional meetings, as the geographical size of the region meant that some people had to travel very long distances across the region for meetings. More notice of meeting dates was needed to help smaller organizations which have to plan use of staff time well ahead. It was also suggested that reduced use of jargon could facilitate effective voluntary participation, as could the provision of “more digestible information”.

(iv) *Developing mutual understanding.* Study participants emphasized the need to enhance general understanding between the voluntary and governmental sectors about respective characteristics, roles and responsibilities. The VCS, it was suggested, needs to convey clearer messages about “what the voluntary and community sector is about”, “champion its role as a major contributor to economic development, the environment and regeneration,” and generally “contribute more positively” to the regional agenda, rather than “reacting and sniping all the time”. Likewise, regional governmental organizations “need to be committed to real partnership and consultation, and need to actively sell information about their ideas and proposed initiatives”.

The role of the regional voluntary sector network organization

Some 25 of the 34 VSN interviewees were from organizations currently in membership of the voluntary sector Regional Network. But for many of them, membership seemed to be largely passive. Comments made about their level of involvement included “fairly minimal” and “not been involved beyond receiving written information”. A few study participants had a more active level

of engagement, including involvement in working groups and forums, joint work with the Regional Network or inviting network staff members to be involved in local or subregional events and initiatives. Among the VCOs, all the urban-based study participants had heard of the Regional Network and nearly all had been actively involved with it. On the other hand, none of the rural organizations which participated in the study had heard of the Regional Network.

VSN interviewees generally felt that they understood the role of the Regional Network. They described it in various ways as an enabler, or advocate, for the voluntary and community sector at the regional level: it “*tries to ensure that the voices of voluntary and community sector organizations reach the appropriate regional agency*”. There were, however, differences of perception about the Regional Network’s advocacy and representational role, for example whether it is its responsibility to take on a representational role itself, or whether its role is more to do with facilitating representation by, rather than on behalf of, the voluntary and community sector. Others (generally those that had less direct involvement with the regional network) saw its role as one of providing services to members: information-providing, capacity-building, or opening up access to funding.

A number of suggestions were made about improving the Regional Network’s role, work and activities. Some thought that it could be more proactive in responding to governmental initiatives. Others thought that rather than simply responding to agendas set by other bodies, the network should be proactive in getting VSNs and VCOs together to develop a voluntary sector agenda for the region. Also on the theme of being more proactive were suggestions that the network could do more to raise awareness among VCOs as to what regionalism is about, how local organizations can be involved and what the benefits might be.

Discussion: Implications of English Regionalism for VCOs

Looking at the experiences to date of local VCOs and VSNs and their views about how they are, and how they should be, linked into new regional structures and the related regional policy agenda, we can identify three main themes: themes which are likely to have applicability well beyond the single region we studied.

First, it seems that urban VCOs have been quicker than rural ones to engage with regionalism and have generally had more positive experiences. Such differences between rural and urban areas in their awareness of regionalization and regional policy issues, and the access difficulties experienced by VCOs not located in the main conurbation of the region are familiar from earlier studies; they may reflect long-running patterns of “rural exclusion” which predate the current phase of English regionalization and which are found well beyond the English situation (Cloke *et al.* 2000; Snavely and Tracy 2000).

Second, regionalization seems to be perceived within the VCO sector as an imposed agenda. The complexity of regional agendas and structures is intimidating for VCOs. There are also numerous perceived practical

barriers, some of them to do with voluntary sector organizational capacity and others more to do with the attitude of people involved with the new regional structures. Here again, there are echoes of earlier research literature. In such cross-sectoral “partnerships”, especially at a local level, voluntary and community organizations often perceive themselves as marginalized or feel that they are carrying costs disproportionate to their size and income and disproportionate to any benefits they receive (Taylor 2001). Gronbjerg’s seminal study of nonprofit funding in the USA (1993) also revealed the difficulties for individual nonprofits of understanding and accessing the different “pots” of funding at different levels of government.

A third theme concerns the role and capacity of the new regional infrastructure organization (the Regional Network). We found that VCOs wanted it to take a more proactive approach to commenting on public policy initiatives, to developing a regional voluntary sector “voice”, and to developing a specifically voluntary sector agenda in the Region. At the same time, there was also a call for the Regional Network to expand the services it provides to its own members and to the regional VCS generally. For example, it was suggested that the Regional Network should do more to educate the voluntary sector about the meaning and benefits of regionalization and to build bridges between the VCS and the governmental sector at the regional level. Here too there are echoes of earlier research about “councils of voluntary service” and “rural community councils” operating as voluntary sector infrastructure bodies at the local authority levels. They too were found to face competing, and often incompatible, expectations about their role and function (Lansley 1996; Osborne and Tricker 1994).

Our data about the experiences of one new English Region also suggest some ways in which current barriers to VCO engagement might be mitigated. For example, it seems that local voluntary sector organizations need to feel that there is some benefit to their regional engagement which can offset the many disincentives (McQuaid 2000); that is, opportunities need to be found to create organizational “exchange” (Levine and White 1961). From the study data, we might surmise that such “exchange” benefits for the VCS could include:

- a sense of “being heard” in regional policy debates (for example, debates on policies which affect the clients of many VCOs, such as rural deprivation and regional transport);
- an opportunity to *shape* public policy and not just receive it (for example by the Regional Network raising the profile of topics such as equal opportunities and social inclusion, which are not currently a high priority in regional debates);
- improved access to funding from sources such as the EU (especially in relation to regeneration and social issues); and
- the opportunity to cement collegiate relationships with counterparts in regional governmental agencies and businesses (particularly important as the governmental and business sectors draw closer together through initiatives such as neighbourhood renewal and Local Strategic Partnerships).

This range of possible benefits emphasizes not only the importance of involvement in the regional agenda for VCOs, but also the risks of *not* participating; for example restricted access to new and emerging sources of income.

Among those few VCOs and VSNs in our study which *had* had some experience of relating to regional governmental structures, there was little sense of “ownership” of the regional agenda. This finding is in notable contrast with the situation described by Chaney and Fevre (2001) in Wales, where there was evidence of deep and serious engagement by the voluntary sector with the National Assembly and Welsh policy issues. It is also in contrast with the situation in Northern Ireland, where the Civic Forum created as part of the Belfast Agreement seems to have been relatively successful in providing “a vehicle for the development of an inclusive engagement between political decision-makers and representatives of civil society” (Birrell and Williamson 2001: 214). The accounts suggest that in both cases (the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Civic Forum), VCOs were explicitly integrated into consultation systems from the outset. This has not been the case up to now with the English regional structures, which remain basically a reflection of administrative decentralization rather than democratic participation. But there is still time for VCOs to be drawn into a sense of ownership, especially if practical barriers such as meeting accessibility and common language can be addressed. And if and when Regional Assemblies are elected there will be a further opportunity to draw in VCOs as active participants with a sense of ownership.

In addition to finding means to build the voluntary and community sector’s sense of ownership of English regionalism, the study indicates the need to pay attention to building relationships across the voluntary sector/governmental boundary at regional level. Earlier studies of interorganizational relationships in general, and of VCS/government sector collaborations in particular, have pointed to the growth of interpersonal and interorganizational mutual “trust” as a key success factor (Hudson and Hardy 2002; Huxham 1996; Sullivan and Skelcher 2002). Such trust was lacking in the Region we studied but the data provided pointers to how trust *might* be built in English regions. Some imaginative (but not necessarily high-cost) initiatives are needed from regional governmental organizations and from regional VSNs so that perceived costs of engagement are minimized and the possible exchange benefits are made more apparent. Related to this, the language and behaviour of those in business and government who participate in regional activities and forums need to be such that they do not marginalize and disempower those who represent the voluntary and community sector. At the same time, VCOs and VSNs will need to expand their contextual knowledge about regionalization so that there is some foundation upon which mutual trust across sectors can be developed in the future.

In the light of the many barriers to engagement in the regional agenda by individual VCOs and local VSNs, the organizational capacity of regional voluntary sector network organizations, as well as their ability to act as an organizational intermediary between regional structures and local and subregional VCOs, becomes a key challenge. Often attempts to meet these

kinds of organizational capacity challenges in the voluntary sector are circumscribed through lack of resources. However, the current development of central government's programme on voluntary sector "capacity building and infrastructure" (Home Office 2004; HM Treasury 2002) suggests that in fact there will be substantial sums available for existing and new infrastructure organizations in the near future to enable them to build their own organizational capacity and to build support for VCOs.

The findings suggest several routes which regional voluntary sector network organizations might take in order to become an effective cross-sectoral bridge, including developing cross-sectoral agendas and building the skills and knowledge of regional VCOs. However, this kind of expanded and enhanced role for regional voluntary sector networks in building cross-sectoral interorganizational relationships will not be created by fiat of central or regional government (Burgess *et al.* 2001). For what is also evident from the study data is that regional voluntary sector networks need to give attention to building their own organizational "legitimacy" with two constituencies. One constituency is the multiplicity of local and subregional voluntary organizations and networks. The other is the "other sectors": the multiplicity of organizations which constitute the regional "business sector" and the governmental and quasi-governmental organizations which make up the regional "public sector". In reconciling these two very different demands, regional voluntary sector network organizations will need to avoid being co-opted into the specialist agendas of the business and governmental sectors which, our study suggests, have tended to dominate and shape the regional agenda up to now. Any perceived move in that direction could destroy the legitimacy and credibility of regional voluntary sector networks with their own founding and prime stakeholders—the VCOs and VSNs within their regions.

Conclusion: New Insights into the Voluntary/Governmental Sector Relationship?

At the beginning of this paper we posed the question of whether the introduction of a new and additional tier of government raises new issues for the voluntary and community sector or provides new insights into relationships across the voluntary/governmental sector boundary.

The findings from our study to some extent confirm the maxim that "the more things change, the more they stay the same". Generally we found a lack of mutual understanding about respective organizational imperatives, which belies the current rhetoric about government/voluntary sector cross-sectoral "partnerships". We found governmental officials perceived to be using "jargon" which excludes the voluntary sector and behaving in ways that intimidate voluntary sector representatives on joint fora. We found meetings arranged at times and places convenient for governmental officials but inconvenient for voluntary sector employees and trustees. We found demands for consultation and participation which were well beyond the organizational capacity of small voluntary and community organizations or even local voluntary sector infrastructure organizations. And we also found

a pervasive sense within the VCS of alienation from an imposed government policy agenda. All of these have been found in earlier studies of the government/voluntary sector relationship at both local and national levels (Craig and Manthorpe 1999; Harris 2001; Scott and Russell 2001).

It seems that little has been learned from earlier experiences of problematic government/voluntary sector relationships in England. This can be contrasted with the situation in Wales and Northern Ireland where the need for more than token involvement of the VCS in devolved structures has been recognized. The more positive approach taken in Wales and Northern Ireland may be attributed to greater clarity about the purpose and process of devolution itself, as well as to the importance attached to the voluntary sector's perceived ability to bridge the divide between policy and practice.

From a policy perspective, the failure to learn the lessons from earlier research on the government/voluntary sector relationship is a matter of some concern. For, as our study suggests, there are features of regionalism that mean that the government/voluntary sector relationship at that tier is even more complicated than it is at the local and national levels. For example, the challenge of "cross-sectoral" working at the regional level is more about the relationships between *three* sectors (that is, including the business sector) than the traditional relationship of working across the two sectors of government and voluntary sector organizations. Second, the role of the voluntary and community sector at regional level is, as yet, somewhat unclear, as is the nature of the policy expectations for it. Whereas much of the involvement of VCOs with central and local governmental agencies is in some way to do with a common interest across sectoral boundaries in provision of *welfare services*, this is not the case at regional level. Here the prime interest of governmental agencies is, for the present, in economic development, regeneration and the physical environment—areas in which many VCOs have yet to carve out a clear role for themselves, or credibility with economic policy-makers. Third, engaging with regional structures and the regional agenda requires some new or additional skills from voluntary sector actors such as conceptualizing their catchment area as a "region"; learning to develop a common perspective on policy issues across a large geographical region; and demonstrating credibility as a partner in areas where there is little prior working experience to build on.

This exploratory study in one new English Region suggests, then, that some of the problems that arise in governmental/VCO sector relationships are intrinsic to the cross-sectoral relationship itself. They have been observed earlier at the national and local level and they are apparently recurring now at the new regional tier as well. At the same time, the study suggests factors that might affect the nature of governmental/voluntary sector relationships and their relative success; factors such as the policy focus (social or economic); the number of sectoral boundaries to be crossed (is the business sector involved in partnerships as well?); and the nature of the organizational mechanisms available to draw together the viewpoints of individual voluntary and community organizations and to act as bridge-builders across sectoral boundaries.

Finally, it must be noted that a key finding from our study is the lack of knowledge within the VCO sector about the changing policy and constitutional context within which voluntary and community organizations must now work. There is currently much talk at central government level about the need to build the “capacity” of the voluntary and community sector and to provide it with infrastructure support (Home Office 2004; HM Treasury 2002). Much of that talk is essentially about building the capacity of the third sector to deliver public services. What emerges from the study reported in this paper is that there is an equally important need to build the knowledge base of the voluntary and community sector about key trends in public and social policy, and to consider how the sector can engage with those trends without losing its independence and distinctiveness.

Notes

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1. The English regions are: London, Eastern, East Midlands, North East, West Midlands, North West, South East, South West, Yorkshire and Humberside.
2. London is different from the other eight regions because of the devolved political powers granted to the Mayor and the Greater London Assembly. None of the other regions have elected assemblies yet, although referenda are planned in autumn 2004 for the three northern regions to test public support for elected regional assemblies. There is an economic development agency in London with powers similar to those of RDAs in other regions; however, the London Development Agency differs in that it works for the Mayor and is answerable to him rather than to the Secretary of State for the Department of Trade and Industry. As in the other eight regions, there is a Government Office for London (GOL) but again it differs because it serves as the link between government departments and the Mayor and Assembly.

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