

VCOSS Presentation

6 August 2009-08-07

Introduction

JRF and JRHT are two organisations, established over 100 years ago with a shared purpose, described today as

Searching out the causes of social problems, demonstrating effective solutions, in order to influence real and lasting change.

We run a £10 million programme of independent social policy research, as well as a housing trust, which provides care and support to older people, as well as housing to 2,500 households.

Context

But in 2009 we find ourselves in the middle of a perfect storm.

Demography – the challenge that we could have seen coming. A rapidly ageing population, with more people with disabilities leading longer and fuller and much better lives, and as many people over retirement age as of working age. And this combined with the free movement of people across the world, with their multiple and overlapping identities. The huge advantage soft demographic change for us all, also, in the second and third decades of this century presents us with real and live challenges.

Climate change – don't need to rehearse in the state of Victoria the real impact of climate change, and extraordinary and terrifying weather events. You have suffered hugely with the heat wave, and then the bush fires, and already face the certainty of the end of some of the most vital natural resources.

Finance – the global financial crisis has in the UK moved us into a deep and savage recession, and across the world has destabilised, and challenged in very profound ways. In the UK one overwhelming consequence has been that we know we face very significant spending cuts in the very near future.

In a perfect storm we can cower under our blankets, or we can say, as Barak Obama's adviser has been said to say

'This is too good a crisis to waste'

It is my view that this is our time – the time for which civil society exists.

To quote Rabbi Hillel

If not now, when?

The role of the voluntary sector.

1. The impact of this storm will be felt locally by the poorest and the most disadvantaged. It is in poor neighbourhoods that the price of climate will be paid, where people will suffer the

long term social recession that we know always follows an economic recession, however short lived. The alienation of young people with no work to go to. The damage to communities where women who had worked for a decade are not longer working. And in order to respond to these challenges we need resourceful, resilient communities. It is the voluntary sector at its best that can support and develop such communities.

2. We need to start to shape the post recession economy. It is simply not acceptable that we should snap back to where we were before -when we know that the pre recession economy was neither sustainable, nor just. It is the voluntary sector with its history of mutuality, of protection, with its capacity to amplify the voices of the dispossessed, that can help to lead the re shaping of this economy.
3. And in this new troubled world, where the fight for resource can build a strong society , focused on the common good, or it can end in disaster, we need places for deliberative inquiry; the safe places where different voices can be heard, where differences and competition can be managed, and it is the sectors record in supporting and enabling participation that can be at its best here.

A new settlement

But the sector cannot rise to this challenge without some changes.

1. We need to stop seeing the voluntary sector as a means of service delivery, as defined by the service contracts. If the sector is only a means, then the current short term project based approach to funding – the procurement model – may well work, but if it has an intrinsic value, and is needed by the government for the strength it brings to engagement, the long term role it can play in enabling communities to shape the common good, then it is seen as an end in itself, and this will result in funding that invests in strong organisations, building permanent capacity for the challenge that lie ahead.
2. The sector too will need to change. It will need to attend to its own accountability. There has for too long been a tendency in the UK, and perhaps here, to see the accountability to government as all important. Clearly accountability for money is important, that is basic. But the real and challenging accountability is to the communities we serve. In a new networked age, the old methods of simple broadcast are dated and not effective. We need to engage in a new and different networked dialogue, to reflect the power of communities and the strengths which they will need. It is only a truly independent sector that can do this – can really manage its own accountabilities, and work with government, certainly, but as partners in this important enterprise, not as delivery agents. And finally the sector will need to attend to its mandate. To understand its duty to speak up for the dispossessed, to represent the lived experience of service users, to make sure that those unheard voices can be properly heard, in the highest place in the land. Organisations with a clear mandate, resolutely focused on mission, can speak with clarity and certainty.
3. The sector will also need to be open to new entrants. Every wave of social change has brought new bodies into being. The Industrial Revolution, the post war settlement, the self actualising 1960s all have their legacy in the voluntary and community sector. And so too

will this time. Young people will organise differently around different issues, but they will be part of a self-determining community sector.

But to do all this voluntary and community sector will need to focus on

Self-determination – setting our own agenda, working with communities and with others, recognising that we are agents of change, of challenge, of choice and creativity, but most critically we are connectors, - bringing people together and through our participatory approach supporting, enabling, but not replacing the essential allocative power of representative democracy.

Solidarity - reminding ourselves that we exist for the common good, not for the furtherance of individual business objectives and that in the perfect storm which we face, there are only hazards in trying to approach issues as individual organisations. The old traditions of solidarity and mutuality at the heart of our sector, and the traditions that will bring us through this period

Stewardship – as stewards of scarce resources, we hold charitable resource in trust for future generations, and the boards of our organisations need to act as good stewards of those resources, which include our reputations, our mandates and our constituencies.

Julia Unwin CBE

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