Shall We Walk Together

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This paper will present the result of an action research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001; Hart and Bond, 1995) project aimed at promoting competencies and systemic capacity building within the third sector operating in the social care sector of a Local District in the South East of England. The project is a joint initiative between a Service Evaluation and Development Group of a Faculty of Health and Social Care of an English University and a consortium of third sector organisations. The project is sponsored by the Knowledge Transfer program of the University and it is jointly managed by representative of the University and of the local consortium.

The social care sector in England is undergoing significant changes. Such changes are led by policy agendas, namely “personalisation” and “transforming social care” (HM Government, 2007; Department of Health, 2008). The changes started before the credit crunch and the financial crisis. The latter process is creating a further constrain for the implementation of these policies. There are ambivalent reactions to this Central Government driven change. On one hand it is seen as the possibility to improve the choice and control that people who use services will have on the way their needs are addressed and met (among others, Hunter and Ritchie, 2007). On the other this move is seen as a “back door” way for privatising the provision of social care and creating a two-tiered system (among others, Leece and Leece, 2006).

The debate among academics, scholars and researchers is mirrored by the views of the third sector that sees the current situation (policy changes and financial constrains) at the same time as a situation that is confusing and putting the identity and the existence itself of many third sector organisations at risk as well as providing an opportunity for the sector to develop further its role as equal partner with the statutory and the market, increase its visibility and leading innovative approaches. This ambivalence can be traced in the grey literature (among others, London Skill for Care, 2009).

The third sector will require a large programme of changes to adapt to the challenges: new language, new workers/volunteer, and innovative approaches and services. One optimistic view is that the change could play to the strengths of the third sector: flexibility, creativity and responsiveness to need. However it has been demonstrated that these features of the third sector are very often conjecture and not fully demonstrated (Osborne, 1998).

The action research aims at

- Mapping the organisations and activities, and in doing so identifying gaps and duplications. This will allow the assessment of the impact of third sector organisations in terms of employment, service provided, contribution to the local economy, etc.
- Raising the consortium profile, and in doing so strengthening the voice of the third sector organisations in the District
- Supporting the development of third sector organisations (e.g. access to resources etc.).
The research team, in line with the action research tradition, is the result of a combination of volunteers from the consortium (who take the role of researchers) and volunteers from the academic staff of the University (who take the role of supervisors). The research activities are designed in a way that allows the researcher to learn research skills “by doing” and being mentored by the academic staff from the University.

It is envisaged that the main outcomes could be as follows:

- The establishment of a permanent working group in the local consortium responsible for a regular audit of the consortium members’ natures, size, income generation capacity, organisational and professional needs and activities.

- The rise of the consortium profile in the local arena.

- The increasing authority of the voice of the third sector in the District.

It is envisaged that the main outputs could be as follows:

- The production of a local audit tool for mapping the organisations and the activities of the third sector in the District.

- The design of an inclusive process for design the tool and regularly updating it.

- The production of a regular (annual or biannual) District Almanac based on the model of a National Almanac.

The local Almanac has to be seen as a “transitional object” (Winnicot, 1953) that will provide a “holding environment” (Winnicot, 1960) with the purpose of supporting a systemic socio-technical change in the local third sector (Cherns, 1976).

References


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