Modelling government – voluntary sector relationships: emerging trends and issues

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1. Reviewing LG – VS relationships in England, 1979-2000 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . ...
Over the past twenty years in the UK, relationships between local government and the voluntary and non-profit organization sector have assumed increasing importance in the delivery of public services to local communities. During this period government policy has propelled the voluntary sector from the margins to the mainstream, and often the forefront, of the delivery of a range of public services to local communities – such as housing, social services, environmental services, and community and economic regeneration programmes (Gastor & Deacon 1998). Voluntary organizations (VOs) are now recognized to be critical actors in the development of social policy within the plural state (Harris and Rochester, 2000).

Over this period, important transitions have taken place in the relationships between local government and the voluntary sector – with profound implications for their respective roles in delivering public services. The voluntary sector has found itself, not always willingly, to be a frequently cited ally in the quest by government for innovation, efficiency and responsiveness in public service provision (see, for example, Home Office 1990). Indeed, from having survived the heyday of the corporatist welfare state, with the assumption that local and central government bureaucracies could single-handedly provide policy solutions and public services to meet all needs and in all economic circumstances, the voluntary sector has once again found itself to be a valued actor within the policy process.

The public policy space within which this sector currently operates is based on a normative model of complimentary relationships between government and the sector where partnership is espoused as the basis for such relationships – both because of its ability to deliver public services effectively and because of its perceived ability to promote social inclusion (Labour Party 1997). In this model, partnership between the sectors is posed within the meta-paradigm of community governance, where partnership is a pre-requisite for the modernization of local government and the development of responsive and effective local public services (Clarke & Stewart 1998).

However, as Young (2000) has shown, this model is not unproblematic and alternative narratives about this relationship can be constructed which reject the partnership paradigm. He highlights in particular two alternative narratives, based on the assumptions

– that the societal value of VOs lies in their capacity to operate independently from government, and that therefore partnership working poses real

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1 Numerous overlapping terms are used to describe this sector in the UK – including ‘voluntary organizations’ ‘non-profit organizations’ and ‘community organizations’. Whilst these terms do denote differences in emphasis, these nuances are not especially relevant to this current analysis. For the sake of simplicity, therefore, the generic terms ‘voluntary organization’ and ‘voluntary sector’ will be used within this paper.