

'The Income Generation Engine' in Social Business

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THOUGHT PIECE – ‘THE INCOME GENERATION ENGINE’ IN SOCIAL BUSINESS

Abstract

Purpose: The objective of this article is to conceptualise how voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations in England responded to a dramatic shift in the policy and funding environment since 2010 (or ‘austerity’). It does this by investigating how case study VCS organisations have attempted to continue to deliver ‘NR’ (NR) support to disadvantaged areas.

Design/methodology/approach: This article is informed by research undertaken over five years during a period of dramatic policy shift in England, between 2009 and 2013. Through a set of case study ‘NR’ organisations, primarily from the VCS, it utilises existing literature and primary quantitative and qualitative data on organisational change in the case studies to conceptualise how VCS organisations have attempted to survive an austere environment whilst continuing their missions of supporting disadvantaged communities.

Findings: Those VCS organisations considered ‘successful’ have adapted their strategies and structures around what might be called an ‘income generation engine’ in order to navigate an austere environment. There are both strengths and weaknesses to the income generation engine which has implications for social business organisations and their beneficiaries.

Limitations: Case study research is always very limited in terms of its generalisability and different cases may have resulted in different findings, but the aim of this ‘thought piece’ article is to raise awareness of the speculative or emergent concept of ‘the income generation engine’ in order to increase understandings of how VCS organisations might increasingly need to operate in an austere environment, and their implications.

Contributions: This article has developed the concept of ‘the income generation engine’ from experiences of practice during a period of dramatic shift in policy and funding environments. It has implications for practice and policy, as well as conceptual debate.

Social Business and Income Generation Engines

The focus of this thought piece is on how voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations delivering ‘NR’ (NR) in England have responded to a dramatic shift in the policy and funding environment since 2010. Whilst this topic appears very specific, the findings of this investigation have implications for readers of *Social Business*. VCS organisations delivering NR have had to navigate and respond to an environment that has shifted from being relatively stable and publicly-funded to one characterised by uncertainty, constraint and the search for sustainability through a more ‘diverse’ profile of funding sources beyond the state. *Sound familiar?* A common ‘solution’ to

this major challenge for many VCS organisations has been the development of what might be called ‘the income generation engine’. As with all engines, the income generation engine has both strengths and weaknesses which stakeholders involved in social business should be aware of.

UK policy over the last 20 years – a ‘roller coaster ride’ for VCS organisations

Voluntary and community organisations in the UK, particularly England, have experienced a ‘roller coaster ride’ in their funding environment over the last 20 years. The previous Labour administrations of 1997 to 2010 invested a great deal of resources into the VCS, as part of a social democratic ‘Third Way’ (Giddens, 1998) which aimed to mitigate state *and* market dominance. Welfare provision aimed to be delivered through a ‘mixed market’ of public, private and VCS (or ‘third sector’) providers, and the VCS was heavily supported by successive Labour administrations to build the sector’s professionalism and capacity to engage in this process. Concurrently, the same Labour administrations also invested heavily in ‘urban regeneration’ and ‘neighbourhood renewal’ as part of an agenda to reduce inequalities between the poorest neighbourhoods and the ‘national average’. Many small and medium-sized VCS organisations were created or became engaged in this agenda – particularly through NR programmes, given their localised contexts and missions of supporting disadvantaged communities. However, the fallout from the financial crisis, followed by the installation of the Conservative Liberal-Democrat Coalition Government in 2010 saw dramatic policy shift under ‘austerity’, resulting in the rapid termination of almost all funding for NR programmes and significant cuts to funding to local authorities – both being major sources of income for VCS organisations during the Labour years. Summarising Scott (2010), many VCS organisations have moved from a time of relative plenty to a time of famine.

Methodological Approach

A number of case studies (primarily VCS organisations) involved in delivering NR practice were investigated through evaluative research on their performance and management processes:

- A local authority-funded Neighbourhood Management group involving community representatives and other local stakeholders;
- A central government-funded NR programme partnership organisation, and its independent ‘successor’ organisation;
- A multi-agency and community partnership involving community sector representatives;
- A regeneration agency-funded ‘work-based learning programme’ for practitioners, and;
- An independent local regeneration organisation

Looking across these case studies' experiences of delivering NR initiatives, a number of key organisational 'factors' were identified as critical to delivering sustainable NR practice *before* dramatic policy shift. The data was then analysed *following* dramatic policy shift to identify if and how these factors had changed. Comparing before and after policy shift resulted in the development of a conceptualisation of changes in organisational practice in NR following a period of shift.

Organisational factors critical to successful regeneration practice before policy shift

Empirical research across the case studies identified a number of 'organisational factors' considered critical to sustainable NR practice. For two cases, the first factor was that *resident representatives felt there was some community 'ownership' of the NR process* (Factor 1). This was considered critical in generating a broad consensus during the design and development of local regeneration strategies (Broughton *et al*, 2009; Jarvis *et al*, 2012).

In two cases, the commitment of increasingly trusted professionals was critical to maintaining and progressing relationships between communities and influential agencies. These 'embedded' professionals (often with strong connections to the area) essentially provided a conduit for advocacy, offering *brokerage* (Factor 2) between residents' concerns and senior decision-makers at local authority level, which had the resources to move things forward (Jarvis *et al*, 2012). Over time a positive balance was struck between the desire for local control and the necessity for wider collaboration and resources to get things done. This was manifest in organisations' assertive yet collaborative negotiations and formal agreements with various agencies representing broader city-level interests. Such processes assisted in legitimising and driving forward local strategies at city levels, where political power and resources resided (Broughton *et al*, 2009).

Continuous collaborative brokerage often gave case study neighbourhoods greater visibility and legitimacy within cities' institutional and political landscapes – or *institutional positioning* (Factor 3). Coupled with the financial incentives of regeneration programme funding, this *institutional positioning* resulted in some case study NR organisations becoming key players within city-level structures over time. Such legitimacy resulted in organisations being able to leverage resources from other stakeholder agencies, and to negotiate more sustainable outcomes for local residents in collaborations with agencies (Broughton *et al*, 2013a).

A third case study (a multi-agency and community partnership) provides evidence of another organisational factor critical to sustainable regeneration practice – that of *leadership* (Factor 4). Research identified examples of joint working between public service agencies and key actors in local faith organisations, which aimed to enhance well-being in neighbourhoods across a large

county. Agency stakeholders reported accounts of the commitment and enthusiasm of key actors in faith organisations to support public agencies around improving neighbourhoods through mobilising other members of the community (Jarvis *et al*, 2010). However, this ‘leadership’ was not just leadership in terms of ‘executive’ leadership, or faith organisations only, but leadership in its broadest sense – ordinary people courageously rising to a challenge out of a sense of social justice, responsibility, duty or faith. This broader interpretation of leadership is thus a critical organisational factor in sustainable NR practice. The first and second case studies also highlighted the importance of leadership – not just from practitioners but also community representatives – in terms of their individual commitment to moving the NR process forward.

The *generic skills and knowledge* (Factor 5) of those involved in NR organisations are also critical to sustainable practice. Empirical evidence from a regeneration management training course illustrated the critical nature of generic skills and knowledge to sustainable regeneration practice, partially informed by Egan’s (2004) *Skills for Sustainable Communities* report. Findings show how practitioners working across organisational boundaries dramatically enhanced a range of generic skills through this training programme, such as relationship development, resulting in positive regeneration outcomes for their regeneration organisations (Broughton *et al*, 2010).

Given the research findings above, a ‘Factor Menu’ was developed outlining some common organisational factors which appeared to lead to successful practice outcomes for NR organisations *prior to* policy shift:

- ‘Community ownership of the NR process’
- ‘Brokerage’
- ‘Institutional positioning’
- ‘Leadership’
- ‘Generic skills and knowledge’.

What dramatic policy shift ‘looked like’ to NR organisations

The key drivers of dramatic policy shift, within the NR arena (but also for many other policy arenas), might be conceptualised as a ‘triple whammy’ of consecutive events taking place between 2008 and 2010 (Broughton *et al*, 2011). This triple whammy began with the 2008 credit crunch and subsequent recession putting significant pressure on public funding in the last two years of (then) Gordon Brown’s Labour Government. Second, the planned phasing-out of key NR programmes (such as the New Deal for Communities programme) began to be undertaken, along with a shift in the emphasis in NR initiatives towards economic, rather than social, aims (and with reduced funding) in

response to the recession. The final element of the triple whammy was the instalment of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition involving dramatic policy shift, resulting from a broader programme of 'austerity' to drastically reduce the public spending deficit.

The triple whammy ultimately resulted in a political landscape which had little place for NR as a policy instrument. For some NR organisations, the initial impact of the triple whammy, from the recession, involved property value losses (which hindered the second case study) and the stalling of regeneration frameworks dependent on land sales and strong land values (which threatened the first case study). NR delivery organisations ultimately faced a policy environment 'vacuum', placing NR (and urban regeneration more broadly) at a crossroads in its future role and direction.

The changing policy environment resulted in a range of new circumstances for delivery organisations at local level. To organise these, analysis of developments reported by the case study organisations resulted in the conceptualisation of a new typology of ten thematic developments – the '10 Cs' – which characterised dramatic policy shift. These 'policy shift Cs' resulted in both opportunities and challenges for NR organisations. These involved:

- *Commissioning* challenges: Local authority cuts resulting in 'centralisation' (or 'centralised localism') of commissioning powers from local level to city-wide executive level, diluting 'brokerage' (Factor 2) and institutional positioning (Factor 3).
- *Co-ordination*: Austerity resulted in back-office 'co-ordination' staff considered as superfluous.
- *Consolidation*: Consolidation of local public service commissioning contracts, increasing their size/scale to reduce costs; squeezing out smaller local organisations which had limited capacity.
- *Competition*: Funding cuts increased competition for resources between neighbourhoods; the Localism Act (2011) opened up new opportunities for (new) delivery organisations through the 'right to challenge' existing service providers.
- *Collaboration*: Opportunities were taken by some smaller regeneration organisations to merge, to respond to larger-scale contracts and commissioning frameworks.
- *Commercial Sector*: The recession saw increased demand for employment support from NR organisations; reductions in capital investment reduced private sector investment leverage; concerns over private sector dominance in decisions by new Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs).
- *Consumer* models: Policies of encouraging VCS organisations to utilise commercial business models were expanded further; 'fee-charging' has increasingly replaced subsidised services.

- Employment *creation* over employment support: Policy prioritised those closest to the labour market, pushing the marginalised with higher support needs further down the queue.
- Data *capture* and management: Abolition of local authority performance frameworks in 2010 resulted in a data vacuum; evidence of inequality between neighbourhoods / areas obscured.
- *Communities* and inequalities: the new challenges to local regeneration organisations appeared at odds with the Coalition Government's new 'Big Society' and Localism agendas, which also disregarded the need for adequate resources to address the lack of a level playing field across different communities.

By the early 2010s, the impact of the various 'policy shift Cs' on the broader landscape for NR organisations was clearly very challenging. Their landscape was characterised by many difficult challenges and few opportunities, and was to have a dramatic impact on those organisational factors critical to sustainable NR practice identified above.

Organisational factors critical to sustainable NR practice after policy shift

Following policy shift, the empirical research identified that the organisational factors prior to policy shift had been influenced by the new post-shift environment, but additionally that such change was being driven by two newly identified 'underpinning' factors:

- *Income Generation Engine (underpinning driver)*
- *Organisational Dynamism (underpinning driver)*
- Community 'ownership' of the NR process – severely weakened
- Brokerage – re-shaped for income generation engine
- Institutional positioning – re-positioned for income generation engine
- *Entrepreneurial Leadership*
- *Entrepreneurial Generic skills*

Empirical evidence across the relevant case study organisations suggested a *significant weakening of a sense of community 'ownership' of the NR process* (Factor 1). Neighbourhood-based policy instruments and funding streams from the previous Labour government were abolished by the new Coalition Government, replaced by 'Big Society' and 'Localism' self-help initiatives with minimal funding that lend themselves to wealthier communities with resources of their own (Broughton *et al*, 2013b). Second, evidence suggested that *'brokerage' had narrowed its focus on income generating activities with primarily economic goals* (Factor 2). Back-office co-ordination and

neighbourhood management functions have been victims of austerity, and remaining brokerage relationships began to focus on where state funding did still remain – i.e. on initiatives with *economic* (rather than social) goals, such as employment creation and enterprise development. Third, evidence suggested that *institutional positioning was now driven by ‘competitiveness in collaboration’* (Factor 3). NR organisations implicitly compete to seize the most influential and financially advantageous positions in broader collaborative networks or consortia of service provision. Fourth, there was evidence to demonstrate how *leadership had become far more entrepreneurial* (Factor 4). Delivery opportunities for NR organisations had become increasingly market-based and competitive, requiring the adoption of commercial cultures of leadership and recruitment of leaders with business acumen. Finally, empirical evidence appeared to show how *remaining support for generic skills and knowledge largely became focused on commercial and business skills* (Factor 5). The continued ‘marketisation’ of public and welfare services had resulted in any remaining support for skills development being driven by commercially-focused narratives and instruments.

In addition to the significant changes that have taken place to the organisational factors in the ‘pre-shift’ Factor Menu, the analysis also unearthed two *additional* organisational factors that appear critical to sustainable NR practice following dramatic policy shift. These factors consistently underpin most of the other factors comprising the modified or ‘post shift’ Factor Menu. These underpinning factors are ‘*the income generation engine*’ and ‘*organisational dynamism*’.

The ‘Income Generation Engine’

Dramatic policy shift has resulted in unprecedented reductions in public funding for many NR organisations, VCS organisations and public agencies, especially local authorities. Austerity, in a neo-liberalist economic context, has become the ‘norm’. For those NR organisations choosing to ‘maintain their place’ or attempting to ‘scale up’ in response to this new environment (rather than, for example, ‘downsizing’ to a volunteer-centric model or by closing), the replacement of lost income is the overriding concern. NR organisations, as well as VCS organisations generally, have had to develop an ‘income generation engine’ within their organisational frameworks in an attempt to replace lost public funding. Reduced resources, increased competition, and no let-up in demand for support services suggest that income generation engines are now critical to organisational survival.

The funding (or ‘fuel’) for the income generation engine is increasingly likely to originate from a more diverse range of sources, given reduced state funding. Whilst this has involved maximising opportunities where public funding still exists (e.g. employment creation and enterprise development) it has increasingly involved identification of new forms of funding for regeneration

activities, such as social investment, philanthropic funding and fee charging. In some cases, the income generation engine may be being used as a 'Robin Hood' model – squeezing every drop of surplus income from service contracts to subsidise more socially-oriented provision which (under receives little other funding under austerity). However, income generation engines also appear costly to maintain and income surpluses often need to be re-invested in their upkeep, before funds can be distributed to other socially-oriented activities. Further, competitive pressures and continued reductions in public service funding increasingly leave NR organisations with little surplus, putting more socially-oriented provision further under threat.

The income generation engine is arguably the underpinning driver of many of the changes to the other organisational factors in the post-shift NR Factor Menu, leading to changes in sustainable NR practice. Much-needed socially-oriented initiatives, including the engagement of the community in the NR process, become marginalised in favour of maximising income for the 'engine', such as initiatives with purely economic goals or in areas outside beneficiary local community. This results in a weakening of the community's 'ownership' of the NR process; residents feel their interests, agendas and priorities no longer align with those of the NR organisation. Brokerage, institutional positioning and generic skills are also increasingly guided by the market-based needs of the income generation engine, shifting their focus away from broader social goals. The needs of the income generation engine, therefore, lie at the heart of much of the change in the NR Factor Menu following policy shift, and thus changes in sustainable NR practice.

Organisational Dynamism

In a neo-liberal economic context under austerity, where short-termism by governments and major political parties appears to be intensifying, NR organisations need to be increasingly 'fleet of foot' internally to respond to change. They need to be 'organisationally dynamic' in their structures, processes and staffing, to react to frequent changes in the external policy and funding environment, including 'markets'. The downside is a persistently volatile environment lacking stability, apparently reflected in continuous change within NR organisations. Organisational dynamism also appears to underpin the modified NR Factor Menu in that competitive pressures force organisations to seek efficiencies, which include social objectives where return on investment is 'lowest'.

The second case study organisation offers an early insight the development of organisational dynamism within NR organisations. Research explored how this organisation's restructuring first developed an income generation engine in the form of a 'trading arm'. This enabled the organisation to undertake necessary 'outward' expansion beyond its original beneficiary neighbourhood (in

terms of geography *and* diversity of activity). This organisation also demonstrated examples of organisational dynamism including continued review of opportunities for cost efficiencies, tax-efficient possibilities, and legal arrangements that maximise funding and value (Broughton *et al*, 2013a). Similar to the income generation engine, organisational dynamism also appears to underpin those changes to the NR Factor Menu; organisational dynamism, in combination with the income regeneration engine, sets the framework for the organisational activity of NR organisations, steering and shaping the delivery portfolio of sustainable NR practice. It is arguable that this case study organisation has sought a balance between sustainable income generation and social objectives, but there remain concerns about how far this balance can remain sustainable in the longer term.

The future role and nature of NR organisations and their practice

The findings and emergent conceptualisation within the post-shift NR Factor Menu have important implications for the future role and nature of NR organisations and their practice, under austerity and beyond. The modified NR Factor Menu points towards the *role* of NR organisations being increasingly viewed as ‘non-profit’ service providers with commercial goals, rather than community advocates with a social mission (Fuller, 2016). The austere environment is obliging NR organisations to direct attention and resources towards opportunities well beyond the remit of their original beneficiary neighbourhoods, to fuel the necessary ‘income generation engine’ they need to survive.

Continued marketisation of public services and funding mechanisms (e.g. social investment) are also marketising the *nature* of NR organisations, as well as VCS organisations generally (Maier *et al*, 2016), compelling them to engage in ‘organisational dynamism’ to compete. NR organisations are increasingly focusing attention on accessing opportunities based on funding efficacy – primarily service areas with politically favoured *economic* objectives – a trend that began to emerge as early as Gordon Brown’s premiership (Lupton, 2013). However whilst there may be ‘diversification’ of *sources* of funding and expansion of territorial reach, this is not diversifying the *breadth* of support for communities – social, community and environmental goals may become marginalised, resulting in a service profile increasingly out of step with communities’ priorities. There is a risk that NR organisations may increasingly become ‘detached’ from their original beneficiary neighbourhoods as financial imperatives, economic objectives and an increasingly competitive external environment narrow their capacity to serve broader community needs (Clayton *et al*; 2016).

Policy implications

In England, policy instruments for NR organisations are now scant, but similar circumstances are now being experienced by VCS organisations more broadly. Policy needs to address the increased

volatility of the operational environment for such organisations. As mentioned, Scott (2010, p367) was cited suggesting that NR stakeholders should “... reflect on how well a time of relative plenty has prepared us for a time of famine”. However, past successive policy persistently encouraged spending *all* funding rather than saving for leaner times, to maximise the impact of delivery for funders. VCS and NR organisations also had little scope to prepare for ‘famine’, and VCS organisations are not encouraged by the Charity Commission to build up substantial reserves. The new environment is also resulting in the inefficient use of organisational resources to *gain* funding – feeding the income generation engine distracts organisations from the delivery of outcomes. Policy should therefore aim to enable organisations to either ‘harvest’ elements of awarded income, or be awarded some form of funding for operational overheads, to improve the stability and security of their financial position, enabling a focus on outcomes. Moreover, policy should also focus on mitigating the negative impacts of organisational responses to policy shift which may be diluting or even uncoupling organisations from their social mission of supporting and representing their local communities (Jones *et al* 2016).

Implications for practice

Some organisations are unable to respond to the challenges of the new environment following dramatic policy shift. Alternative options may involve down-sizing to a low cost, volunteer-centric community organisation or, at worst, closure. For those organisations attempting to survive ‘as is’, or by expanding entrepreneurial activity, the concept of the ‘income generation engine’ is likely to form the basis of their strategies under an austere climate. However, the findings also suggest that social mission is the victim of these evolutionary developments, and organisations’ strategies need to mitigate such negative impacts on local disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Implications for research

The conceptualisation outlined in this article provides pointers for future research. Such research should explore the impacts of marketisation on support organisations and their disadvantaged communities. Future studies should also focus on the impacts of the marketisation of, and continued entrepreneurialism in, those support organisations which are attempting to navigate an austere climate. The findings suggest that more research is particularly required regarding impacts of such changes on social goals, advocacy and representation of disadvantaged local neighbourhoods.

In terms of organisational studies, further research should explore the strengths, weaknesses and contexts of the varieties of income generation engines and organisational dynamism that may exist. This could result in critical typologies developed by analyses of: the range of risks of types of engine and dynamism (financial, reputational and political); the linkages between engines, dynamism and profiles of NR activities, and; whether specific types of engines and dynamism enable higher levels of

community benefit. Such research may identify models of organisational development that generate sustainability for support organisations whilst retaining social goals for their local beneficiary communities.

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