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Using Administrative Data to Understand Civil Society Organisations in Scotland

Topic 1 – Bringing in information from where we can get it

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Introduction

Studying the distribution and characteristics of civil society organisations (CSOs) allows us to understand the distribution of civil society activity, and explore public service provision at the local level.

This is particularly important given the recent increase in reliance on the third sector for welfare provision in many countries and jurisdictions (Chaney and Wincott 2014).

In the UK the sector has been understood by analysing registers of charities: the Charity Commission register in England and Wales, and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator, (for example Mohan and Barnard 2013, Woolvin and Rutherford 2013, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations 2014).

However, the use of these official registers has a number of drawbacks. First, only registered charities are represented, which will exclude many smaller organisations. Second, all registered charities are represented, which will include many that are not involved in civil society as it is usually understood, such as those funding medical research, or independent schools (Mohan and Barnard 2013). Third, the registered office of the charity is represented, which may not coincide with their local of operations, and will underestimate the extended geographic reach of those that have many branches, such as charity shops.

Methods / Problem statement

An alternative source of data on CSOs in Scotland is an administrative database managed by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and maintained by the network of Third Sector Interface organisations and Volunteer Centres that exist across Scotland, who use it to record volunteering opportunities, for contact management and other managerial purposes.

Thus it is a rich record of the CSOs that exist according to interactions with Scotland's substantial civil society support network. The preparation of this database for use in civil society research was part of work funded by a current ESRC grant, and this paper will discuss the challenges inherent in cleaning and sharing such a database; present findings of initial analysis of the dataset; and reflect on the implications for measuring third sector activity more widely.

Results / Proposed solution

Preliminary analysis uncovers that only approximately 1/3 of the 35,000 CSOs represented on the database are registered charities, and therefore represented in other studies. The additional organisations represented are, as expected, more likely to be located outwith the main urban centres of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Moreover, where the activity of the organisation has been coded, the database identifies 40% additional CSOs involved in Community and Social Development, in addition to those identified by the registered

charity route. There are 85 Food Banks and other CSOs working in poverty alleviation which are not registered charities.

Conclusions

This more detailed picture of civil society activity at a local level is valuable in any political context, but is particularly important in Scotland, due both to the decreases in public funding (particularly local authority funding) associated with current austerity measures, and because of the Scottish Governments policy of Community Empowerment, which will favour areas with existing strong civil society sectors.