

Mapping “below-radar” organisations: lessons from a regional study

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Introduction

There is considerable interest in those organisations in the voluntary and community sector which do not appear on the lists of regulatory bodies such as the Charity Commission. They are often referred to as “below-radar” organisations, but there is debate about how many such organisations exist, and about differences between them and other third sector organisations?

In this paper we first discuss methods for estimating the below-radar population and we then describe the process of choosing infrastructure organisations from which we obtained local listings. For both practical and intellectual reasons, selection was necessary. We also discuss variations in the responses from individual organisations and consider the implications this has for our findings. This includes the coverage and quality of data about the individual organisations and the effects of confidentiality restrictions on both the data supplied and the use that we can make of it.

Secondly, we discuss the process of merging, cross-referencing and deduplicating the listings. We were studying 50 local authorities in northern England; over 80 listings were received and the total number of observations in these, when combined with the numbers of organisations on the lists of regulatory bodies such as the Charity Commission, was around 55,000, but this included many duplicates. We have attempted to ensure that no duplicates are left in the final dataset, and that as far as possible we have correctly identified registered charities, companies limited by guarantee, industrial and Provident societies, and community interest companies. Achieving this was a lengthy and complex task; some of it could be automated using key fields such as telephone number or postcode, and some of it required manual checking on a case-by-case basis.

Thirdly, we present our analysis. This includes upper and lower-bound estimates of the numbers of below radar organisations, a classification of these organisations based on textual information supplied, and comparisons between those organisations appearing on listings against those which don't.

Mapping below-radar organisations: methods

In the UK a number of ad hoc local studies of voluntary and community sector organisations have attempted to estimate numbers and characteristics of below-radar organisations but they are rarely if ever comparable. In their 2001 study “Low Flying Heroes”, the New Economics Foundation compared the number of organisations per head found by a number of different local studies. They found a great variability in the results produced, from three groups per one thousand people, to over 20.

In terms of methods, one approach is that used by the LOVAS (local voluntary action studies) implemented by the Home Office. This approach is based on using intensive local ‘on-the-ground’ methods to record and survey all volunteer-using groups and

voluntary organisations. The LOVAS methodology uses ‘local mappers’, researchers who live in or close to the area mapped, to produce lists of a wide range of local organisations. The methodology concentrates on likely sites of voluntary activity, such as schools, public houses and churches, and also draws upon pre-existing lists, such as those held by councils for voluntary service. Having compiled a list, organisations are then sent a survey form about their characteristics and resources. The methodology is therefore resource-intensive and difficult to apply on a large scale. The reliance on the initiative of individual researchers and possible variations in how the methodology is applied means that it is not necessarily possible to directly compare results from different areas.

The alternative which we have adopted follows the local area profiles toolkits developed by the Audit Commission. We have gathered local listings of organisations from relevant local sources, and we then collate these, de-duplicated them and cross-referenced them to listings of charities, CLGs, IPSs, etc. There are obvious potential problems with this approach. Gronbjerg and Clerkin (2005) suggest that, in the context of the non-profit sector, what you find out depends on where you look; put another way, listings will undoubtedly reflect the capacities and priorities of those compiling them and the willingness of those organisations on the list to assist in the process of compiling them.

There is sometimes an assumption that there are vast numbers of small community based organisations known as the “below radar” population, reflected in estimates that there are between 600,000 and 900,000 such organisations (this draws on the new economics foundation’s low-flying heroes paper), but this may rest on a misunderstanding of the nature of the third sector population. Large numbers of organisations which might be thought of as small community organisations do in fact appear on the registers of regulatory bodies, particularly the charity commission. Nearly half of all registered charities have an income of below £10,000; just under 30% have an income of £5000 or less. We can therefore capture considerable detail about small community organisations from the charity commission database, but for those organisations that do not appear in such sources there is no alternative to a small-scale survey. This is reported separately.

There is an inevitable trade-off in an exercise of this kind. The complexity of matching and de-duplication of listings for such a large geographical area is such that an exhaustive collection of all potential listings was not possible. We do not, therefore, claim to have provided a comprehensive profile of the below radar population in our region. Instead we demonstrate the variability that exists in the listings that we have chosen, and we analyse the extent to which certain types of organisation to – or do not – appear on this listings. Our work on the overlap between the lists of regulatory bodies such as the charity commission and the listings provided by local infrastructure bodies is novel.

2. Selection of listings

Some selection of listings is appropriate. If we simply obtained every single possible listing of third sector organisations from umbrella and infrastructure bodies known to us, invariably there would be greater coverage in some areas than others for several reasons, such as investment in data gathering exercises (e.g. associated with

regeneration initiatives). There are also likely to be variations between areas in the kinds of listings submitted, depending on the priorities and interests of those compiling them. It is not safe to assume that these variations unproblematically reflect variations in the vitality of the third sector in different parts of the region.

We therefore concentrated on a subset of what we regard as key infrastructure bodies. At the planning stage, the following organisations were chosen as possible sources of lists of local organisations:

- Local infrastructure bodies (Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS) or equivalent),
- Regional infrastructure bodies,
- Community Foundations,
- Local borough, district, metropolitan and county councils,
- National infrastructure/membership bodies.

Data collection was initially focussed on the CVSs, and then local councils; we also sought listings from Rural Community Councils and we attempted to gather them from community foundations. Furthermore we pursued listings from national organisations covering part of the third sector population (e.g. Scout groups, women's Institutes). This approach gives us consistency across the region. Many other potential listings could have been used but this would have led to greater inconsistency.

The response from CVSs was good, with address data provided from organisations representing over 4/5 of the local authorities in our study area. Contact with regional infrastructure bodies was less successful, with many of these bodies stating that they did not keep such lists (as many are consortia of local bodies) or referring inquiries to the local CVSs. Data collection from local authorities was not as comprehensive as found with local infrastructure organisations. In all, good quality data was provided by organisations covering a quarter of local authority areas, with some other areas providing lists which included just a name.

3:Methodology

In total, around 90 listings have been received containing in excess of 40000 entries. The listings were in various digital and paper formats. These were standardised in Excel and from there imported into a single Access database.

There was a significant variation in the quantity and completeness of individual datasets. Entries in individual listings ranged from 1 to 6844 (with an average of 482 entries per listing), the number of columns ranged from 1 to 191. Several datasets only contained the organisation name and town or postcode and one dataset was just a list of organisation names.

Many listings were essentially address lists, but others contained more extensive data coverage and included full address details and additional information such as; users of the organisation, activities keywords, affiliated faith groups, demographic information about people who access the services, turnover, detailed descriptions etc. Some were clearly the address books of the organisation which supplied them and as such included details of many non-third sector organisations.

This additional data was not included in the master database as it was only available within a limited number of listings. Although charities were identified in some listings, information such as registered charity numbers was not included, so matching was not as straightforward as it might have been.

Address Data: Around 4/5 of entries included postcodes but these were sometimes partial, and there was significant variation in the completeness of individual address details. Absence of full postcodes caused difficulties when running queries to identify duplicates, linking the dataset to lists of registered charities and companies limited by guarantee, identifying organisations located outside of the study area, linking small-area census data on the location of the organisation, and mapping the pattern at the sub-local authority level. 25% of the entries include the contact name of an individual along with the organisation details and address but often there was nothing to indicate whether the addresses provided are of the location where the organisation is based (e.g. the location of the village hall), the location from which an organisation is managed or the home address of the individual who is the contact name for the organisation.

Extensive work was carried out to de-duplicate the listings both electronically, and through manual checking. The dataset was matched with datasets which list charities and other non-charitable TSOs within the study area by matching postcodes and organisation names.

Classification: Initially classification was undertaken through an automated process using in which classifications were allocated based upon words within the organisation name. These keywords were assigned a classification category based on the International Classification of Non-profit organisations.

This process was only partly successful as many organisations contained several words which could be linked to different classification categories, while place names in organisation names also introduced complexity. Due to these issues the organisations have been classified semi-manually based on the organisation name (only 18% of entries have descriptions).

This is very a time-consuming process; to date just over three-quarters of the entries have been classified. It is likely that it will not be possible to classify a large proportion of the currently un-classified entries as it is difficult to determine the aim of some organisations from their names without having detailed knowledge of the groups or doing undertaking lengthy internet searches on an organisation-organisation basis.

4. Description and analysis

Estimates of the below radar population

We begin by taking a global perspective on our listings and simply quantifying the numbers of “below radar” organisations which appear on them. We then look at variations between local authorities in the numbers and the ratio of these organisations to population. We compare the distribution of below radar organisations with the

distribution of regulated organisations. This allows us to generate upper- and lower-bound estimates of the numbers below radar organisations in an area, though it is fair to say that the higher estimates depend largely on the number of lists supplied.

We then refine this work by restricting analysis to those organisations appearing on listings provided by local councils for voluntary service and by community foundations. This gives us a consistent list of infrastructure bodies operating across the whole of our region. Of course it generates lower estimates but the advantage is that some comparisons can be made between local authorities.

On the basis of this we then analyse the distribution of below radar organisations. We would expect, for example, a more dispersed pattern since such organisations will be located in communities rather than in administrative offices in urban centres. There is some evidence of this, and there is also evidence of a pro-deprivation gradient for some types of below-radar organisations and the reverse for others.

Which registered third sector organisations appear on the lists generated by local infrastructure bodies?

Our working hypothesis here is that there is no difference between the kinds of regulated third sector organisation (charity, CMG, IPS, CIC) that appear on any of the lists provided by local infrastructure bodies, and those that don't. We test this by looking at the characteristics of those organisations which appear on our listings and comparing them with those that do not. Extensions of this could be confined to a focus on individual types of listing, and to consideration of whether there are particular organisations, or particular types of organisations, which appear regularly on more than one local listing.

Further work

This project will enable us to conduct a survey confined solely to below-radar organisations, in contrast to much previous work, because we will be able with a reasonable degree of confidence to identify such organisations. In turn that will provide a basis for comments about the resources and activities of below-radar organisations which will complement other work in this area.