Third Sector Commentary: A view on neo-liberalism of the sector, Kate Mukungu[2]

As a participant in NETSRG, I verbally presented a review of the article by Kim (2013) focusing on voluntary and community sector (VCS) participation in the Self-Sufficiency Programme (SSP), the South Korean equivalent of Welfare to Work. Here I present a written expansion of that verbal review, solely in relation to this article, as opposed to all three articles that made up the session on neo-liberalisation. Before offering my thoughts on Kim's work, I wish to explain it as my article of choice.

Firstly, I knew even before the inaugural meeting of the research group that the session in which I most wanted to participate was the neo-liberalisation of the VCS. This is because neo-liberalism is a concept in which I have immersed myself as an academic but is not a term I generally hear uttered in VCS networks and meetings at work. In fact, the prospect of being part of a debate neo-liberalism with other VCS colleagues for the first time was the main reason I was drawn to the group. Secondly, I was particularly interested in the international context of Kim's article, which appealed as a reminder that the forces of neo-liberalism are not confined to the borders of England, Europe and North America. Although borne of the ideology of Thatcher and Reagan, the impact of neo-liberalism is now global, due primarily to the influence of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It follows that the struggles faced by those who would wish to swim against that particular tide are faced the world over too. So, it would seem incomplete to consider neo-liberalism only in relation to one's own area and political context and given that South Korea is a not a country about which I have much knowledge or any experience, this paper seemed to offer much that could be learned.

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[2] **Please note the views expressed in this paper are my own and not designed to represent Tyneside Women's Health or any other organisation in which I have a formal role.**

So, now onto the article review which entails my responses to the three questions set by the group:

1)   What theoretical position is the paper trying to advance?

The main finding of the study is to unveil how the VCS 'recreated democratic and inclusive environments' in the mandatory policy setting of SSP.   Kim purports that the VCS achieved by organising a range of activities outside of SSP for 'recipients' and by transferring authority to them.

2)   Do you agree with the position?

I found the article fascinating in terms of learning how the VCS operated as community organisers during authoritarian rule in South Korea and the changes that came with democracy, as VCS organisations were given the remit to run services akin to Job Centre Plus.   I particularly value the insight Kim provides into the dilemmas faced by VCS organisations with a strong history of collective action that is pro-poor people, to then take on the role of assessing whether individuals are deserving of state financial support or not. I also found it helpful to access Kim's observations through his mixed methodology; archival research, semi-structured interviews and a period of participant observation.

However, I don't totally agree with the position taken by Kim as I think he is at risk of over-emphasising the significance of positive impact of the ways VCS organisations engaged with recipients in comparison to state counterparts.

> "As new street-level bureaucrats, voluntary organizations can exercise a degree
> of autonomy on the frontline despite the bureaucratic constraints engendered by
> partnership and can thereby reshape a participatory culture within the policy
> system " (Kim: 580)

When I look at the examples Kim provided, I think he is mainly articulating the ways in which VCS organisations have put a human face on a process that is tasked with separating the deserving from the undeserving poor. In doing so he highlights that much of the reaching out to recipients by VCS staff has been at their own expense, such as celebrating birthdays and organising camping trips. The staff efforts were also aimed at raising the esteem of the families in culturally important ways, such as buying gifts that invoke success in applying to university (for children of recipients) and by attending funerals of recipients' family members in the evening, as a sign of regard in the community. Kim also credits VCS organisations for introducing processes to encourage leadership and inclusiveness, although such initiatives had mixed success and some unintended outcomes that were not positive.

The examples of the extra efforts that Kim observes in the VCS resonate with my own experience of the sector, here and in other countries. I can therefore relate to them and in that regard they come as no surprise. However, it would still appear that such localised initiatives, although mainly positive, are integrated into a larger national system that largely remains structurally unaffected by them.

Kim also observes that VCS work to challenge poverty since its role as part of SSP is not the same as the community organising work of the past:

> "Of course, the ways in which community organizations retain their spirit of autonomy in partnership have become more indirect and nuanced than their previous work outside of partnership." (Kim: 580)

With this in mind, it is necessary to balance what the VCS has achieved in providing a more human face in SSP, against what it has lost through becoming more 'indirect' and 'nuanced' than before.

3)   How does this reflect practice or enhance thinking in the sector?

I think that the paper touches on pertinent issues impacting on the VCS in this part of the world, such as whether to participate in the work programmes and other initiatives in which individuals are conscripts rather than willing participants, and, if yes, how to do so in a way that is true to the values of the VCS organisation. Similarly, the risks associated with partnership with larger entities, particularly, though I would argue not necessarily, from other sectors are also clear. Kim (p. 565) observes that these partnerships may be 'sites of struggle' for VCS organisations. In a UK context, caution in relation to partnership approach in large national such as the work programme are being increasingly reported, leaving VCS organisations on guard against being used as 'bid candy' (Butler, 2011) in a competitive process to win contracts.

What the article does not attempt to advance however, is a particularly overt theoretical position on the neo-liberalisation of the VCS sector. In fact it is bureaucratization that is explicitly mentioned as a keyword of the article, rather than neo-liberalism and whilst the two concepts are strongly linked, they are not one and the same. I hope the local VCS does become more deliberate in exploring what neo-liberalism is, how it has influenced us our sector as well as wider society, and, most of all, explores what the alternatives are. I say this without naiveté as I understand from first-hand experience the pressures of working flat out to achieve charitable objectives, honour explicitly shared values, balance the books and generally find a way to sustainably steward an organisation. However, if we are not willing to challenge our own legitimacy in the wider context of challenging the legitimacy of the system in which we operate, then we are in danger of missing the point.

> "The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum....while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate." Chomsky (98: 43)

In quoting Chomsky above, it may be worth reflecting on that which feminists have argued for a long time; our role is not to be obedient, but rather to seek social justice and emancipation. The challenge is how to demonstrate that purpose in a landscape which places increasing emphasis on eligibility criteria, compliance, sanctions and austerity.

References

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