

Chapter 1

Efficacy of Networking and Collaborations: Evidence From Social Enterprises

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ABSTRACT

Social enterprises have business models that aim to solve social, health, and environmental issues in communities. Drawing on theoretical perspectives in political science, neo-classical economists, and third sector management, the research seeks to understand organisation-level explanation of the types of networking and collaborative strategies small social enterprises employed pre-COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 lockdown. This rapid response research combines interviews with 22 third sector chief executive officers and analysis of policy measures announced during the COVID-19 lockdown. The findings suggest identifiable benefits of networking and collaboration between organisations and across sectors during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study represents an original contribution to knowledge and understanding of organisations networking and collaboration strategies employed to drive the transformation of health and social care services in communities.

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus (COVID-19) is an etiological agent and human-to-human transmission of the (SARS-COV-2) virus has affected several countries around the world. It has been labelled as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) (WHO: Situation Report-97). Combatting the COVID-19 pandemic involves public health, social services, private sector and third sector organisations, all collaborating to provide services to the community. The UK went into lockdown on March 23rd, 2020, with rules coming into place stating the following:

i) shopping for necessities; ii) a day for exercise; iii) medical need or providing care and iv) travelling to or from work (if you cannot work from home) (Ogden, 2020).

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These rules mainly affected the way in which public services were delivered. The Government introduced the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme and provided the £750 million Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan to organisations to help keep them afloat. However, there was a lack of clarity about how the £750 million would be allocated, small third sector social enterprise organisations were unclear about their eligibility and how they should apply (NVCO, 2020). Nearly two weeks after the Government announced £750 million of funding for the third sector, the Secretary of State was still unable to provide sufficient detail or clarity about the eligibility criteria for allocating that loan. An announcement of funding was of limited benefit when small social enterprises were facing imminent closure and were unclear whether they were eligible or how to apply (NVCO, 2022).

The need for several sector organisations to continue to deliver services throughout the Covid-19 lockdown meant that they were limited in the extent to which they could make use of the Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

These organisations were concerned that the parameters for any loan provided by the government favoured those working in the private sector, which meant that they would receive limited support (Hynman, 2020). Furthermore, the difficulty was that the Government Coronavirus Job Retention scheme, or 'laying staff off', meant that organisations can stand down staff at exactly the time when they want staff to stay on and deliver the increase in demand for services.

This study provides an original contribution to literature by explaining networking activities undertaken by social enterprises, pre-Covid-19 lockdown, first lockdown and collaborative actions taken at local, national, and international levels during the lockdown to assist the most vulnerable in our societies. Future research could empirically examine small social enterprises networking and collaboration activities and intended outcomes through longitudinal studies cross-sector and cross borders.

The UK Third Sector Social Enterprises

The UK's third sector social enterprises are highly diverse in terms of structure and service delivery. The sector is comprised of organisations of vastly different sizes, operating under different funding models, and providing a tremendous range of services. Many social enterprises perform vital work supporting the vulnerable in society. Yet, several small social enterprises were fighting for survival within weeks of the first Covid-19 lockdown as traditional methods of generating income dried up overnight with social distancing making delivering services difficult and more costly. Financial interest sustainability is a major concern for several Third sector small social enterprises with limited reserves and limited income generating mechanisms in place. As a result, they depend predominately on government contracted services (NVCO, 2020).

Academic Notion of the Third Sector

Academics within the sector have increased in the last three decades as the understanding of the benefits and the contributions of the sector to the economy increases (Vickers, 2010). For instance, neo-classical economists view the existence of the sector in terms of the market and the state failures (Weisbord, 1997). Neo-classical economists suggest that the state has failed to fulfil the demand for public services, and therefore, the sector organisations emerge to fill the gaps (Maher, 2018a).

Another explanation of the existence of the sector is the privatisation of public services rooted in the market-based philosophies of the Conservative government (1979 – 1997) (Hopkin and Shaw, 2016).

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