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| Institution: UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM |
| Unit of Assessment: D30 History |
| Title of case study: Preserving and Learning from the Past: NGOs and political engagement in Britain |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The impact was on public, professional and policy discussion of the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in British society and politics. Specifically:</p> <p>(a) Preservation and conservation practices: the research impacted library and museum practices through the deposition of several archives of NGOs now accessible to a broader public, and to a campaign to encourage NGOs to make further depositions.</p> <p>(b) Policy and public debates – the impact was on government officials, NGO staff and political commentators who were all concerned with how the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector, NGOs and the ‘Big Society’ might be formulated, and how examples of good practice from the past might be replicated in the future</p> |
| <p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The underpinning research has been led by Matthew Hilton and Nicholas Crowson who were both appointed as lecturers at Birmingham in 1997 (Hilton was made professor in 2006; Crowson in 2012). They were supported by Jean-François Mouhot and James McKay who were employed as research assistants on two externally funded research projects. The first led to the launch of an online Database of Archives of NGOs (DANGO) in January 2008 which provides information on the archival details of 1,978 NGOs. The second ran from 2008 until 2012 investigating NGOs in Britain from 1945. This mapped the size and scale of the NGO sector, assessed its role and examined its power. The research built on Hilton’s long-standing research into consumer activist NGOs that began with an investigation of the UK and global consumer movements (<i>Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain</i> (Cambridge, 2003); <i>Prosperity for All</i> (Cornell, 2009)). The research was supported by externally awarded grants and is ongoing (see below for details).</p> <p>The key finding of the research was one that spoke directly to policy debates, volunteering, civil society, democratic participation and the ‘Big Society’. NGOs have contributed enormously to a professionalization and a privatization of politics in modern Britain. They have transformed the nature of social and political interaction and they have done so according to the changing needs, values and interests of citizens. This means that governments have not been able to shape civil society and the voluntary sector according to short-term priorities. More specifically, the research concluded that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Civil society is not in decline in Britain. While membership of trade unions, political parties, and churches has fallen, membership of new social movements and NGOs has flourished. 2. The nature of democratic participation has changed. While citizens are less likely to vote at the ballot box, they are more likely to support causes through donations and direct debit. 3. In contrast to theorists of social capital, this ought not to be interpreted as a decline in democracy. Rather, there are rational reasons for supporting organisations that require little active involvement beyond financial support. 4. Social and political trust is not a consequence of citizen participation. Rather, it is the cause. The public has opted to support increasingly professional and expert-driven civic groups through arms-length, ‘cheque-book’ activism. This has been a calculated decision to trust certain types of organisation to act on its behalf when dealing with other experts. 5. The expansion of the welfare state has not weakened civic participation. In many instances the state has promoted and strengthened the voluntary sector, the welfare state has acted as a spur to further voluntary initiatives and, rather than being in competition, the state and the voluntary sector have complemented one another. 6. Such findings seriously call into question the key assumptions of the ‘Big Society’ as propounded by the Coalition government since May 2010. 7. The significant role played by NGOs means that they should be encouraged to make their archives publicly available so that we can better understand and interpret their role in the past so as to shape future policy. |
| 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references) |

Impact case study (REF3b)

Key grants:

- a) DANGO: funded by an AHRC Resource Enhancement Grant 112181 (£194,467), awarded to Hilton and Crowson, 2005 – 2007.
- b) NGOs in Britain: Leverhulme Trust Research Grant F/00 094/AV (£440,605), awarded to Hilton 2008 – 2012.
- c) Non-state humanitarianism: AHRC Network Grant AH/K002805/1 (£26,668), awarded to Hilton 2013 - 2014

Key outputs (all have been subject to rigorous peer-review and are the outputs of grants receiving a high quality grading in end of grant reports):

- R1. Matthew Hilton, James McKay, Nicholas Crowson & Jean-Francois Mouhot, *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2013) [listed in REF2]
- R2. Matthew Hilton, Jean-Francois Mouhot, Nicholas Crowson & James McKay, *A History of NGOs in Britain: Charities, Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector since 1945* (Palgrave, 2012). [listed in REF2]
- R3. Matthew Hilton, 'Politics is ordinary: non-governmental organisations and political participation in contemporary Britain', *Twentieth-Century British History*, 22, 2011, pp. 230-268. [listed in REF2]
- R4. Matthew Hilton & James McKay, *The Ages of Voluntarism: Evolution and Change in Modern British Voluntary Action* (Oxford: British Academy/Oxford University Press, 2011) [available from HEI on request].
- R5. Matthew Hilton, 'International aid and development NGOs in Britain and human rights since 1945', *Humanity*, Winter 2012, pp. 449-472, special issue on social rights edited by Paul Betts, Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman, Andreas Eckert, Sandrine Kott and Malgorzata Mazurek. [listed in REF2]
- R6. Nicholas Crowson, 'Revisiting the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act: Westminster, Whitehall and the Homelessness Lobby', *Twentieth-Century British History*, 2013, pp. 424-447 [listed in REF2].

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The impact of the research was on two key communities: (a) professional archivists and NGO leaders with an interest in preserving the records of NGOs so that access to their pasts can be used to shape discussions about the present and future role of the voluntary sector; and (b). NGOs, civil servants and political commentators with an interest in the role of the voluntary sector and the changing nature of democratic participation in modern Britain.

(a) Preservation and conservation practices:

DANGO was deliberately set up with a view to promoting greater accessibility to the histories of NGOs. The online database created by the project has 1,978 entries (amounting to approximately 750,000 words of text), and is freely available at www.dango.bham.ac.uk. The website had received over 80,000 visits (with 61,569 absolutely unique visitors) between the launch in January 2008 and 31 July 2013, demonstrating the demand for access to this information from the public (particularly in the UK and USA). In addition, this success led to several NGOs (for example Relate, CAFOD, National Anti-Vivisection Society, and Amnesty International (UK), Friends of the Earth and the Muslim Council of Britain) reconsidering their own heritage policies (they contacted the project team to receive advice on how to make a deposit). The project team acted as liaison point advising which archival repositories to approach, and giving general advice on preservation and consulting with the National Register of Archives (NRA). Major depositions assisted by the project include Save the Children to Birmingham's Cadbury Research Library which consists of several hundred boxes of material which is still being catalogued.

The project liaised with the NRA and allowed its data to be exported by the NRA in order to update its own records. The team advised professional bodies on archiving policies for NGOs. For instance, Crowson and McKay served on the Research Information Network and the Birmingham Voluntary Services Council. Hilton has assisted the Campaign for Voluntary Sector Archives, and spoke at its launch in October 2012 at the House of Lords, alongside other supporters such as Tristram Hunt, MP (see source 1 below and <http://www.voluntarysectorarchives.org.uk/>), and he is due to visit the Information Commission, along with the Children's Society archivist, to advise on

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the importance of conserving NGO records. He has also helped raise general awareness of NGOs by participating in the campaign to create an official United Nations 'World NGOs Day' and spoke at their Leadership Meeting in September 2012, hosted by Lord Lyndon Harrison.

(b) Public and policy debate:

Impact was an integral element of the research from the start. The advisory committees of DANGO and the NGOs in Britain project consisted of academics with direct links to the policy community (the historian Pat Thane connected to the History and Policy Network and Pete Alcock of the Third Sector Research Centre and links to the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)), a voluntary sector leader (Nicholas Deakin, Chair of the Commission on the Future of the Voluntary Sector) and a prominent former civil servant (Michael Bichard, Director of the Institute for Government, 2008-2010). These facilitated access to three key impact communities:

(i) NGO sector: NGOs co-produced the research agenda through specific events, eg: a conference at the British Academy in 2009 at which representatives of 25 NGOs (including the NCVO, the Institute for Voluntary Action Research and the Charities Aid Foundation) were able to influence the research; a witness seminar ('Voluntarism in the 1980s') at the NCVO in 2009 which enabled reflections on the past by 8 sector leaders (e.g., Stuart Etherington, CEO of NCVO) to point to lessons for the future; and a similar event on 'Environmentalism' at the IHR with prominent attendees such as Charles Secrett (former Director, Friends of the Earth) (source 3).

These connections made it easier to ensure that the results of the research were fed back, stimulating further debate and dialogue. For instance, as a result Hilton was invited to speak at the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations on 8 September 2010 ahead of a House of Lords discussion on the 'Big Society' (Baroness Angela Smith former Labour Minister for the Office of the Third Sector attended and the CEO, Sir Stephen Bubb, subsequently blogged to the wider sector that 'history is our guide' – source 2) and to the senior policy staff of the Big Lottery Fund (eg Roger Whinhall, Ambreen Shah) in September 2011 on how it might fund NGOs in the future. The research has influenced how NGOs consider their approach to policy making: a policy officer at the RSPB states, 'it has helped shape my thinking as head of water policy and, through discussions with colleagues, the work of the organisation more widely' (source 4). As testament to this, he subsequently requested Hilton speak to the RSPB policy team on 21 November 2013 to advise on how NGOs can navigate their relationships with both governments and their members. In addition, the research has provided a model for future research such that Save the Children and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) have become partners on a new project on the history of 'non-state humanitarianism' (source 5).

(ii) Government: With the election of the Coalition in 2010 Hilton and Crowson took advantage of the focus on the 'Big Society' to influence debates within government. The links above resulted in an invitation to advise the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit on the usefulness of the concept and how it might be made to work (source 6). They therefore released the findings early in a briefing paper (*Civic Participation and Social Responsibility* – source 7), which was sent to the Strategy Unit ahead of the meeting. The work contributed to an ongoing scepticism among policy makers about the Big Society, and to alternative state-voluntary sector connections. To this end, Hilton joined another AHRC project (led by Catherine Durose, University Birmingham) to advise the Department of Communities and Local Government in 2013 in two areas ('Redefining Service Delivery' and 'Community Governance in the Context of Decentralisation') about the policy implications of the 'Connected Communities' research programme (source 8). At the local government level, McKay has gone on to be a Birmingham councillor, where his work on environmentalism facilitated his appointment as the Cabinet Member for a Green, Safe and Smart City. He writes 'my work on the NGOs in Britain project has fed directly into my thinking on local government's and the Labour party's relationship with the voluntary sector... [the research] on environmentalism now underpins my Cabinet work, driving the city's green agenda forward'. As a consequence of the impact in this area, Hilton was awarded the University of Birmingham Founders' Award for Policy Advancement in 2011.

(iii) Policy commentators: Opportunities for influencing wider discussions were sought through

social media, public discussion and interviews for popular and professional media (e.g., for a cover feature in the February 2012 edition of the leading sector publication, *Charity Times*). One highlight was a debate on the 'Big Society' in Oxford in 2012, where Hilton shared a platform with two key politicians – Jesse Norman (Conservative MP and author of *The Big Society*) and Lord Maurice Glasman (architect of 'Blue Labour') – and demonstrated the ongoing vitality and resistance of the voluntary sector to bend to top-down initiatives by such politicians. Internationally, it has led to opportunities for Continuing Professional Development for public administrators abroad to learn about British civil society so that they can better respond to its emergence in, particularly, China and Russia. The first delegation was received in November 2012 consisting of 20 staff from the Bureau of Civil Affairs of Guangzhou Municipality, Hilton discussed with them why the public supports NGOs. This has led to further requests and is ongoing: for instance Hilton advised a dozen delegates of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration on 30 September 2013 on the same issue.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [1] Contact details provided for secretary of the **Campaign for Voluntary Sector Archives**
- [2] Sir Stephen Bubb, **CEO of the ACEVO**. Blog entry on the ACEVO talk is available at: <http://bloggerbubb.blogspot.com/2010/09/history-is-our-guide-to-future.html>
- [3] The **transcripts of the two witness seminars** are available at: Matthew Hilton, James McKay, Nicholas Crowson & Herjeet Marway (eds), 'The voluntary sector in 1980s Britain', *Contemporary British History*, 25:4, 2011, pp. 499-519 and http://www.ngo.bham.ac.uk/Witness_Seminar_Green_break-through_of_1989.htm.
- [4] Factual statement provided by policy officer at the RSPB.
- [5] Contact details provided for key contact at the **Overseas Development Institute** and one of the key partners in co-producing a research agenda on the history of non-state humanitarianism.
- [6] Contact details provided for Policy Advisor at the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit who co-ordinated the exchange.
- [7] The **Briefing Paper**, *Civic Participation and Social Responsibility*, is available at: <http://www.ngo.bham.ac.uk/Civic%20Participation.pdf>. It was reworked for History and Policy at <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-103.html> and a longer version appeared as , 'Charities, voluntary organisations and non-governmental organisations in Britain since 1945', in Armine Ishkanian, Simon Szreter & Hakan Seckinelgin (eds.), *Big Society?* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2012), pp. 81-92 which was launched at the LSE with a public debate: <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/events/2012/06/20120619t1830vOT.aspx>. Summary policy statements are also available as: Matthew Hilton, 'Is civic society really in decline', *Birmingham Brief*, June 2010, <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/thebirminghambrief/items/civicsocietydecline.aspx>; and James McKay, 'Lobbying – a necessary part of politics', *Birmingham Brief*, October 2011, www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/thebirminghambrief/items/21oct-lobbying.aspx.
- [8] Contact details provided for **Lead for Decentralisation and Big Society**: Research and Analysis at the Department for Communities and Local Government who co-ordinated the work for the AHRC-funded review of the policy implications of the Connected Communities programme.