

# Programme Specification

## Non-Governmental Public Action

### Contents

1. [Executive Summary](#)
2. [Programme Objectives](#)
3. [Rationale for the Programme - Why a programme and why now?](#)
  - 3.1 [Scientific context](#)
  - 3.2 [Practical and policy context](#)
4. [Profile of the Programme](#)
  - 4.1 [Research areas/topics](#)
    - [Strand A: Organisations and non-governmental public action](#)
    - [Strand B: The non-governmental sector and public action](#)
    - [Strand C: Global processes and impacts in non-governmental public action](#)

### Executive summary

**1.1** Public action by and for disadvantaged people, undertaken by non-governmental organisations and other non-governmental actors, is increasingly significant at local and international levels. This is reflected in their growing contribution to GDP and employment, and the increasing volume of resources channelled through them by governments and international agencies. Recognition of the field's growing significance has been accompanied by little systematic research. An ESRC programme in this area would be valuable for several reasons. First, despite its relevance to policy agendas, existing research is fragmented, parochial, and often funded by 'non-objective' sources. The need for independent, high quality, user-focused research is clear. Secondly, the area offers substantial opportunities for linking research and practice, North/South collaborations, and transdisciplinary work. Thirdly, this area has strong relevance to at least four ESRC priority themes.

**1.2** An integrative research framework will build systematically on research to date to develop theory, generate new empirical data, build beneficial linkages between researchers and users, and build capacity in a theoretically exciting and policy-

relevant field of social science research. Projects will include cross-country comparative work, and transdisciplinary research will be encouraged. A fellowship programme will ensure strong links between researchers and users in the UK and internationally, particularly in developing countries.

### **Programme objectives**

**2.1** Public action is defined as purposive collective action for public or private ends by a range of actors. The focus of the programme is not just on NGOs but on a broader range of formal and informal non-governmental actors concerned with poverty reduction and social transformation. These might include advocacy networks, campaigns and coalitions, trades unions, peace groups, social forums, rights-based groups, social enterprise, fair and ethical trade groups, business in the community initiatives, social movements. Projects will be expected to contribute to three main objectives:

- (a) **build theory** in relation to non-governmental public action in order to underpin research, policy and practice;
- (b) **generate empirical knowledge** about non-governmental public action, processes, , institutions, organisations and networks, using a range of approaches to data collection and analysis including ethnography, international comparative analysis of political and economic data, organisational sociology etc;
- (c) **strengthen the co-production of knowledge** by researchers and those being researched, with implications for social actors, government policy makers, and wider knowledge communities.

**2.2** The initiative will focus on understanding the impact of non-governmental public action in reducing poverty and exclusion, and in social transformation, from an international comparative and multidisciplinary perspective. Relevant disciplines include *sociology* (as it relates to the study of organisations, networks and social movements, to agency and structure); *political science* (specifically, citizen action in relation to government, politics of the policy process, deliberative politics, the rise of 'global governance' ideas and structures, protest and resistance); *anthropology* (and especially the ethnography of organisations, different understandings of 'non-governmentality', micro-politics of change processes, the interfaces between different actors and organisations); *economics* (economic theories of the non-governmental 'sector' and public action, links with business, civil society and the state); *management* (operations of non-governmental actors, including governance, human resource management, leadership); *psychology* (individual and collective processes); *development studies* (relevance of non-governmental action to development and poverty reduction; pro-poor politics; non-governmental public action in conflict and post-conflict situations; donor policies and practices towards non-governmental actors) and social policy (government and non-government partnerships in welfare provision; social exclusion; poverty analysis). Research projects overall will provide a comprehensive framework for understanding non-governmental public action and

how it can be advanced. Proposals which draw on innovative combinations of methodologies and disciplines will be particularly welcome.

## **Rationale for the Programme - Why a programme and why now?**

### **3.1 Scientific context**

**3.1.1** Since the late 1980s awareness has grown of the 'non-governmental' as an important area of study. It has been conceptualised as a 'third sector' of institutions sandwiched between the state and market, a 'voluntary sector' of uncoerced action, a tax-exempt 'charitable' activity, a citizen-based 'civil society', a 'not-for-profit' sector distinct from conventional business, and a public sphere of deliberative democracy. Ideas such as the 'community sector' (referring to small-scale associationalism), the French concept of '*l'economie sociale*', and debates on 'social capital' have all been influential. Within European and 'developed' country social policy, the role of the UK 'voluntary sector' in social service delivery has attracted attention as part of 'new public management' and the 'mixed provision of welfare', raising concerns about performance and accountability. Its campaigning role in relation to rights, policy reform and 'partnership', and its distinctive management challenges (such as involving volunteers and managing charitable status) are also growing research themes. Specialised research units – such as CCS at LSE – operate at several UK universities. The role of non-governmental public action has been inconclusively debated since Sen set out arguments for considering development as freedom. In so far as development NGOs are enabling people to achieve more of their human potential, they are a force for good; but not all NGO practice lives up to this, and there is a need for more research on their diverse impacts. Moreover there is a need for a broader understanding and analysis of nongovernmental public action that extends beyond NGOs to embrace the full range of non-governmental actors, organisations and processes in diverse contexts concerned with reducing poverty and exclusion and social transformation.

**3.1.2** In the wider world, the field of development studies has researched the growing service delivery and advocacy roles of NGOs in poverty reduction work and humanitarian intervention, analysed at local, national and global levels. In international relations, the role of NGOs in the UN system, in conflict resolution and other aspects of global governance, has attracted research attention, as have attempts by mainly US foundations to build civil society in the so-called 'transitional' countries, although this remains a particular gap. Research associations such as the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) and the US Association for Research on Non-Profit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA) reflect these interests. In the UK, the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN) - which began life as an ESRC seminar initiative - and the Development Studies Association's NGO Study Group have provided space for exchanges between researchers and practitioners, as has emergence of the specialised press such as *Alliance*. These associations focus predominantly on development NGOs, or the voluntary sector, or non-profit organisations rather than the broader range of non-governmental actors.

**3.1.3** The two main research initiatives on NGOs during the 1990s were the Johns Hopkins Comparative Study which began to quantify the non-profit sector, and the Manchester International NGO conferences which generated case studies. Elements

of a research field and some researcher communities have emerged. But the field is fragmented by several factors: confusing terminologies that restrict exchange and learning among researchers; a lack of cross-disciplinary dialogue and research; low levels of theory development compared to research on government or business; an unhelpful separation of UK social policy researchers from 'development' researchers; a preponderance of narrow, micro-level organisational case studies which are often anecdotal and have limited value for comparative study; tensions around theoretical and 'applied' research agendas and between researchers and practitioners, which tend to weaken the academic quality and applicability of much research to date; and limited research capacity in many parts of the world - particularly 'the South' - which has impeded international research collaboration. Moreover there has been a narrow and contained focus on certain types of organisation which undertake non-governmental public action, (in particular non-profit or development NGOs or voluntary sector organisations). This has inhibited more textured analysis, empirical work and theoretical development in relation to the broader range of non-governmental actors, organisations and processes in diverse contexts that contribute to the reduction of poverty and exclusion, and social transformation, such as trades unions, cooperatives, social enterprises, advocacy coalitions, faith-based groups, business-community partnerships and social movements.

### *3.2 Practical and policy context*

**3.2.1** The dominance of neo-liberal economic policy agendas has contributed to the growth of the 'non-governmental' in two mutually reinforcing ways. First, NGOs have been identified as a key pillar in strategies to roll back the state and privatise service delivery systems, in both developed and developing countries; but secondly, the non-governmental domain has often constituted a site of resistance by citizens to such policies, contributing to the building of alternatives either through organised opposition, policy influence or self-help alternatives.

**3.2.2** The 1996 Deakin Report on the Future of the Voluntary Sector signalled renewed policy interest in the UK, and led to an exercise in policy building that linked academics, practitioners and policy makers around a new system of collaborative 'compacts'. The UK experience aroused international interest from government actors interested in regulation and effectiveness issues. The European Union recently published a policy document identifying this theme as a future priority. Globally, the non-governmental sector commands a third of multilateral aid flows. Tri-sector policy 'partnership' between government, non-government and business actors is increasingly important in industrialised and developing countries. The UK Department for International Development (DfID), using a similar language of partnership, has signalled interest in working increasingly with 'civil society'<sup>1</sup> both in the UK and in developing countries. DfID also remains close to the UK international NGO community to which it contributes resources through its Programme Agreements and the Civil Society Challenge Fund.

---

<sup>1</sup> DfID defines civil society to include a broad range of associational forms, including highly institutionalised groups such as religious organisations, trades unions, business associations, cooperatives and NGOs, and looser forms of associations such as social movements, networks and virtual groups.

**3.2.3** Data on many of these issues exist but, as with the considerable ‘grey’ literature produced by foundations, funders and NGOs themselves in the form of policy statements and evaluation reports, is rarely analysed systematically.

## **Profile of the Programme**

### **4.1 Research areas/topics**

**4.1.1** The theme of ‘non-governmental public action’ is preferable to a focus solely on ‘NGOs’ or the ‘voluntary sector’ for three reasons. **First**, it is important to research the diversity of organisational forms, values, ideologies, activities, and relationships with the state and market, in order to avoid a crudely functional view of non-governmental public action. **Secondly**, research needs to look beyond NGOs as large formal organisations working in developing countries. These have received disproportionate research attention, but form just a part of a wider, less well understood group of non-governmental forms (informal associations, action networks, faith-based groups, trades unions, political parties, etc) and national contexts (industrialised, transitional, developing, middle income etc). A focus on concepts of organisation is as important as research into ‘organisations’ themselves. **Thirdly**, the ‘parallel worlds’ of the UK’s separate ‘NGO’ and ‘voluntary sector’ research fields must be transcended. This separation has inhibited exchange and learning around common concerns, due to a geographical division of labour at odds with increasingly global forms of non-governmental action, and the creation of different, over-lapping, and often confusing terminologies.

**4.1.2** Non-governmental public action can be analysed through three different entry points, :

- **organisation:** increased understanding of the forms, structures and activities of non-governmental organisations, networks and informal groups which participate in public action, and the ways in which the interests of ‘beneficiaries’ or members are addressed;
- **Sector:** systematic and detailed comparison of the characteristics, extent and influence of national sectors of non-governmental public action, including historical, social, political, economic and cultural factors;
- **process:** processes of non-governmental public action at local, national and global levels and how these relate to roles and impacts.

Each heading will correspond with a separate programme strand. The programme will commission research within an overall framework that links these three units of analysis, along with the three research objectives in paragraph 2.1 above. Three sets of issues, corresponding with the overall objectives, will be considered within each strand.

Strand A: Organisations and non-governmental public action

**4.1.3** There are several key *theoretical* questions about the application of ideas developed in other research fields and whether new theory is needed to explain non-governmental public action. The relevance or otherwise of management theory to non-governmental actors has implications for effectiveness. For example, how do staff values and incentives relate to organisational performance? How far do non-governmental organisations reflect individualist or collectivist values? How useful are existing theories of public accountability to non-governmental actors? The role of organisational and anthropological theory looking beyond the concept of 'organisation' towards networks, relationships, alliances etc, may offer insights into less familiar sites of non-governmental public action. Can the various typologies of organisations emerging from different geographical research traditions be reconciled?

**4.1.4** *Empirical* research at the organisational level is needed to address the dimensions and processes of non-governmental public action. For example, what are the relative impacts of different non-governmental organisational types in relation to activities? Do non-governmental actors succeed in strengthening the 'capabilities' (c.f. Sen) of disadvantaged groups? How does an organisation define its objectives and manage its accountability to the complex range of stakeholders over time? What is the impact of partnership policies and contracting arrangements on organisations and their effectiveness? What is the extent of the non-governmental contribution to poverty reduction across different national contexts? How do participatory policy processes affect the activities, effectiveness, goals and values of non-governmental actors?

**4.1.5** Such work will have potential *applications* in policy and practice. Non-governmental actors need access to findings which illustrate processes of organisational learning and performance evaluation. Relations between researchers and users can be strengthened by a clearer understanding of how those engaged in non-governmental public action produce, access and use research. Research with non-governmental actors and their beneficiaries (particularly in view of experiences documented below in 4.4) provides an ideal arena for understanding ethics and accountability issues which arise in the relationship between researchers and users.

Strand B: The non-governmental sector<sup>2</sup> and public action

**6.** At the sectoral level of non-governmental public action, there are several *theoretical* priorities. Cross-national comparisons will build understanding of the changing contours of non-governmental public action, including North/South influences and differences. The roles of history, politics, states, and culture in shaping non-governmental public action across national and regional contexts can help avoid over-generalised theorising and policy prescription. The impact of conflict on the field of non-governmental public action requires comparative exploration. Sectoral origins theories from the US and elsewhere (for example, market failure, public good, trust) need testing in developing country contexts, and extending beyond a narrow

---

<sup>2</sup> The term 'sector' is used in a broad sense to refer to the set of actors, organisations and processes engaged in non-governmental public action. It therefore is not equivalent here to the narrower concepts of 'voluntary sector' or NGOs.

focus on 'non-profit', 'voluntary sector organisations' and development NGOs. The very notion of a self-defined 'non-governmental sector' and its relationship to a wider field of non-governmental public action needs to be unravelled in different contexts. A critical issue for aid donors seeking to 'build' civil society is the assumption that Western concepts of 'civil society' apply in non-Western contexts. As yet, there is little application of economic theory to non-governmental public action. For example, the nature and effects of competition within and between the government, market and the non-governmental arenas and the comparative advantage of non-governmental organisations in economic activity. Or, the relevance of tax regimes in different contexts on economic activity of market and non-governmental organisations

**4.1.7** *Empirical* research at the macro level is required to fill important gaps in our knowledge. What is the role of the non-governmental sector as a 'breeding ground' for activists (for example, people moving between government, business and non-governmental organisations)? Many non-governmental actors move closer, for voluntary or involuntary reasons, to government or business. How permeable are the boundaries between the non-governmental, government and business worlds? Can social policy benefit from a deeper understanding of local traditions of voluntarism, philanthropy and informal social protection? How in practice do external actors such as donor agencies, international social movements, faith-based organisations, shape non-governmental public action in non-Western and Western contexts? And how does non-governmental public action in non-Western and Western contexts shape external actors? What systems of accountability are emerging at the sectoral level such as codes of conduct?, How effective are these and how do they shape the activities of non-governmental actors?

**4.1.8** Potential *applications* of work at the sectoral level include improved legal frameworks for non-governmental public action (for example, law on charities, taxation, foreign contributions); and the co-ordination of non-governmental actors and the role of umbrella organisations, both autonomous and state-sponsored. Better knowledge of the sector can lead to improved public sector training curricula, for example, which enhance awareness among public employees of the strengths and weaknesses of non-governmental actors.

Strand C: Global processes and impacts in non-governmental public action

**4.1.9** This strand examines the role of non-governmental public action within wider global and national issues such as poverty reduction, human rights and social justice. At a *theoretical* level, the dimensions and processes of policy influence have received little attention. The processes of deliberative politics and the different roles of non-governmental actors need further theorising. Institutional arrangements for involving non-governmental actors in policy processes, their effectiveness, and their impact on nongovernmental public action call for comparative theoretical and empirical exploration in different contexts. What is the relevance of (new) social movement theory, or of gender-based critiques of the private dimensions of ‘public’ space, to understanding non-governmental public action? What light do theories of conflict and its resolution shed on the nature, forms and purposes of non-governmental public action. How do theories of social exclusion contribute to understanding non-governmental public action? How does the study of non-governmental public action relate to current efforts to build theories of global governance and ‘global civil society’?

**4.1.10** At the *empirical* level, new data can address issue such as the effectiveness of non-governmental public action. For example, how effective (in the words of DfID) is ‘civil society’ as a ‘driver of pro-poor change’? How have changes in the focus and extent of international aid affected non-governmental public action in developing and transitional countries? Accurate data are elusive, particularly when looking beyond forms of ‘official’ aid towards individual charitable giving, remittances etc. How are changing relationships between ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ NGOs affecting the ‘development industry’; and how relevant still are these categories? How will EU enlargement affect non-governmental actors and processes? How do the economic dimensions of non-governmental public action relate to emerging new forms of business practice, such as ethical trade and new attention to the ‘triple bottom line’ of profit, social performance and environmental impact? How is information and communication technology (ICT) being used to build transnational interactions and networks?

**4.1.11** The potential *applications* of such work are numerous, particularly in relation to building North-South institutional research partnerships on non-governmental themes and promoting learning between different communities of non-governmental actors (South-South, North-South etc). The programme will also facilitate research on the global research-user chain by highlighting how social science research has been undertaken and disseminated to non-governmental users and their beneficiaries.