

Charities - the future as our greatest adventure?

In Birmingham's city centre, as in many urban areas, new structures are rising from brownfield sites with investors making grandiose claims about the impact these developments will have; 'History in the making' proclaims one billboard, 'Building the future is our greatest adventure' shouts another.

So what does this have to do with the future of charities? These building site hoardings illustrate different perspectives on change. 'History in the making' both looks to the past and suggests a legacy into the future, and that this development (or charitable entity) will endure in the same way for a very long time. 'The future is our greatest adventure' instead takes the view that the future could be relatively unknown and that it can represent a real ride on a pathway we might not yet fully know nor understand.

When charities put aside the 'tyranny of the urgent' to undertake strategic planning, for many, it is a response to the rapidly changing (current) environment (Chew & Osborne, 2008), with the operational components and responses being quite familiar. Chew and Osborne (2008) note that larger, and mature charities are more likely to intentionally experiment and use the learnings from this to strategize more consciously. Nevertheless, strategies are seldom developed beyond the short- to medium-term. Further, taking time out to contemplate how individual trends may merge and impact a whole sector is seldom undertaken. And the manner in which an entity or group of entities should respond to the results of this discernment are less clear-cut than merely defining opportunities and threats. Hence, in a prior issue of this Journal, Cordery, Smith and Berger (2017) focused on three trends that will directly affect the charitable sector over the next generation: demography, technology and availability of resources (both financial and volunteer). Using a scenario planning methodology we developed four possible scenarios from the drivers; each with its own opportunities and threats or drawbacks to the charity sector as a whole.

These scenarios take us forward to the world of the charity in 2045. Perhaps at this point you are questioning the purpose of this crystal ball gazing and its relevance to the charities that are grappling

with the challenges of the present and the near future. However, this is where taking the future as our greatest adventure can pay dividends. The changes forecast over the next generation will be much more dramatic than merely a tweaking of the recent past. And to prosper, the charities of today, and the sector more broadly, will need to engage and respond.

The success of such responses and therefore the sustainability of the charities sector in the future depends, we argue, on three factors. First, the extent to which those within the sector are reflective and open to exploring the future. The signs of change are all around us, from an increasingly ageing society, escalating technology (including crypto-currencies and artificial intelligence), and increasingly scarce financial and volunteering resources (Cordery et al., 2017). But if the sector's focus is reactive and short-term, the proactive exploration of opportunities that may emerge from these future drivers, and the scenarios postulated in Cordery et al. (2017) will be overlooked, or left unexplored.

Second, is the importance of the availability, access and use of reliable data to understand the drivers and research the possible trajectories. Some trends have a wealth of data behind them (for example, demographic trends and projections). Other trends are still emergent and their power and potency less clear (for example, the projected interaction between artificial intelligence and volunteering, or crypto-currencies and charities' financial sustainability). Further research into the impact of drivers and their consequences is required to effectively respond to and shape the future directions of charitable entities.

Third, we argue that if charities or even aspects of the charitable sector operate in isolation, in a siloed mind-set, they and the sector as a whole will struggle to fully explore and respond to these changes. Rather, can the sector work collaboratively to make a collective response? Or does austerity and competition limit collaborative efforts? As part of responding to the future, it is imperative that there is an agreement on what comprises an ideal charity sector for the future. Mohan and Breeze (2016) posit a number of current 'logics' of charity, including a focus on needs

and human flourishing, an acceptance that there are many visions of human good (i.e. they are non-teleological) and that therefore disparate charities pursue different approaches in delivering public good. This assumes that even today there could be particular attributes of the charitable sector that we do not believe are 'charitable'. If non-charitable aspects are evident now, how do we manage the ambiguity inherent in hopes, dreams and reality for the future? In this uncertain, adventurous future, how does a charity remain relevant to its resource providers and beneficiaries? And not just a singular charity, but how does the charitable sector retain its *raison d'être* and relevance within a radically changed society? These are questions that are ripe for discussion and debate.

References

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