



**Non-Governmental
Public Action
Programme**

Preliminary Research Findings Brief

Activists, Power and Sectoral Boundaries: Life Histories of NGO
Leaders

Project aims, objectives, methods

Studies of the relationship between third sector organisations and government tend to focus on formal, operational issues such as 'partnerships'. Less is known about what happens at sector boundaries, or about informal relationships and exchanges among the people who work at the 'interface'. Between 2005-7 a comparative study was undertaken by David Lewis to examine the experiences of people who cross between the third sector and the public sector in UK, Bangladesh and Philippines. An ongoing independent study on the topic by Alejandro Natal Martínez at El Colegio Mexiquense in Mexico was also incorporated into the research.

These 'sector boundary crossers' include those: (i) whose careers have led them to change jobs across sector; (ii) who are 'seconded' for a limited period; or (iii) who are simultaneously active in both sectors (such as a public sector official who serves on a third sector board). The value of studying such people is that their stories give a distinctive perspective on sector differences, similarities and inter-relationships, different and from accounts of people who work either in one sector or the other. We also learn more about what 'acts' of cross-over tell us about the changing policy, politics and relationships between the sectors in particular contexts and periods.

The research used qualitative ethnographic life history interviews. Informants provided a detailed personal account of their working life to date, with a particular emphasis on their experiences of crossing sectors. A total of 20 interviews was collected in each country: (i) UK (where there has been intensified boundary crossing since the Labour government was elected in 1997), (ii) Philippines (where there has been a history of third sector people going into elected governments since the fall of Marcos in 1986), (iii) Bangladesh (where people tend to move from government into positions in the third sector); (iv) Mexico (where a new politics recently opened up government to third sector organisations).

Key research findings

Local histories, politics and context contributed to a different motivations for and directions and outcomes from, boundary crossing.

In the Philippines, successive governments since 1986 have recruited third sector leaders into certain departments such as agrarian reform, housing and social welfare with results that have sometimes been creative and have helped advance reforms, but which have also often met with resistance and become highly politicised.

In Bangladesh, a highly-developed and largely externally-funded third sector often attracts government people into jobs. Some are retired officials, whose informal networks with former colleagues help third sector organisations manage often difficult relations with government. Others are younger people whose choice of a public sector career is undermined by low salaries, unchallenging organisational culture and high levels of corruption – leading them to ‘cross over’ and seek employment in a more dynamic third sector context.

In the UK, increasingly flexible governance arrangements have intensified cross-over in both directions, with some high profile third sector people drawn into government on secondment and staying on, while others return to the third sector ‘older and wiser’ having gained new knowledge and skills. Some government agencies such as the Department for International Development (DfID) expanded and recruited from the ranks of experienced people in NGOs, particularly in conflict and humanitarian work.

In Mexico, a range of third sector leaders were drawn into government for the first time by the government of Vicente Fox (2000-6) which broke the traditional PRI party’s grip on power, but few of these individuals were prepared for the change and found it almost impossible to transfer their skills or build reformist coalitions.

Seven common themes also emerged across the contexts:

1. There may be creativity associated with an act of cross-over, since it involves taking ideas from one context into another, leading to innovation and learning;
2. Boundary crossers may experience an epiphany, leading to them to re-evaluate their ideas and perspectives;
3. Despite cross-over, there is still a high level of caricature involved in each sector’s view of ‘the other’;
4. Third sector organisations play an important role in society ‘training’ people for other jobs and sectors;
5. Some people derive power from ‘straddling’ the boundary between the sectors, which can create a more balanced perspective but may also raise accountability concerns;
6. Some people simply follow issues and jobs and have very little commitment to sector;
7. A sector is an ‘idea’ as well as a concrete set of arrangements: both levels are important, since there are different working methods, identities and expectations among those who work in each.

Policy and practice implications

- There is potential value in 'cross over' experiences as a source of new learning that can contribute ideas/innovation within the public and third sectors.
- Researchers and policy makers need to give more importance to the informal and personal linkages when thinking about third sector/government relationships.
- The effectiveness of both sectors may benefit from practical strategies that challenge caricatured sector views (e.g. exchanges, secondments, immersions, and training).
- Effective policies concerned with promoting government/third sector 'partnerships' need to be rooted in context specific histories rather than in generalised technical models.

Key publications and outputs

Lewis, D. (2008, in press) 'Crossing the boundaries between 'third sector' and state: life-work histories from Philippines, Bangladesh and the UK.' *Third World Quarterly*, Volume 29 (1).

Lewis, D. (2008, in press) 'Using Life-Work Histories in Social Policy Research: The Case of Third Sector/Public Sector Boundary Crossing'. *Journal of Social Policy*, 37, 4 (October).

(Both the above articles are available at: <http://personal.lse.ac.uk/lewisd/>)

Lewis, D. 'Understanding the sector swappers'. *Third Sector*, January 2008 (an 800 word article for practitioners).

Natal-Martinez, A. (2008) 'Cruces intersectoriales: la participation de actors de la sociedad com funcionarios publicos: El Caso Mexican 2000-2006'. Mexican journal *Metapolitica* <http://www.metapolitica.com.mx/>

For further information

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