

Evaluation of the ESRC Non-Governmental Public Action Research Programme

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Executive Summary

The ESRC Non-Governmental Public Action Programme set out to further understand the impact of non-governmental public action in reducing poverty and exclusion, and in social transformation, from an international comparative and multi-disciplinary perspective.

The Programme has successfully achieved each of its objectives.

On the first objective, “build[ing] theory in relation to non-governmental public action in order to underpin research, policy and practice,” the Programme has built theory at multiple levels and through multiple channels on different aspects of non-governmental public action. It has done so in areas within the field of non-governmental public action that range from new or extended theory on the relationship between national and international security and non-government public action; the theory of northern-southern interactions in the non-governmental field; the relationship between markets and non-governmental action; and the relationships between economic development and cooperatives, among other areas.

The Programme has also clearly succeeded in its second objective, “generat[ing] 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.” We have multiple examples of that successful generation of empirical knowledge.

The Programme also succeeded in its third objective, which was “to strengthen the co-production of knowledge by researchers and those being researched with implications for social actors, government policy makers, and wider knowledge communities.” This is among the most innovative elements of this Programme, and it was highly successful.

The academic quality and achievements of the research were excellent, both at the level of projects and at the Programme level itself. I have evaluated academic quality and achievements by examining the individual research projects; integrated Programme activities; survey responses and interview discussions on the academic quality and achievements; and published outputs. In each of these areas the academic quality and achievements emerge as excellent.

A number of the individual research projects indicate very high academic quality, as discussed in more detail below. Titles and synopses of the individual research projects are provided in Annex 1.

The multiple innovative aspects of the Programme included an extensive Programme website; extensive external communication methods directed toward non-academic users, practitioners, and policymakers, including research finding publications; leaflets, photographic exhibitions, and others; involvement of academics and practitioners who were external to Programme activities; the Practitioner Fellow and International Visiting Fellow portions of the Programme; participation of Programme project holders and participants in the ESRC workshop on research into policy and practice; media training and a media staff member; and in numerous other ways.

Interdisciplinarity was a key focus point throughout the Programme, beginning with the grant applications and stretching through the project research, Programme workshops, the NGPAP/NCVO seminars, and the final Programme conference. This Programme was not based in one or two academic disciplines, but drew strongly from a range of disciplines and approaches, especially, as the Programme report indicates, “sociology, anthropology, international relations, political science, history, development studies, conflict studies, cultural studies, geography, development economics and statistics.”

The Programme was focused internationally and comparatively from the start, and that was one of its most significant successes. The work of the Programme (above the project level) and of the Director helped significantly to make the many themes and approaches comparative in nature, facilitating dialogue and the development of theory beyond the work of the projects themselves. The Programme worked very closely with scholars, practitioners and others outside the UK, and held many events outside the UK, a significant boost for the export and influence of British social science in the area of non-governmental public action and the disciplinary fields of the project holders.

Dissemination, both within the academic community and crucially with practitioners and policy makers in line with both the objectives of the Programme and the Programme’s dissemination plans, has been highly effective.

The Programme worked exceptionally hard and with clear success to ensure that this research had impact on non-research users such as practitioners and policy makers. Both the projects and the Programme itself provided contributions to policy debates in the UK but also in a number of the more than forty countries involved in the Programme.

The value added by Programme organisation is exceptionally highly praised by literally every project researcher, participant, practitioner fellow, and non-academic user either surveyed or researched. On at least several occasions, interviewees have told the Consultant that the organisation of the Programme (and the role of the Director and staff, discussed below) “made this Programme much more than the sum of its [project] parts.” It seems clear that, for this set of activities, the Programme organisation functioned very well. There is, to put it plainly, no dissent on this score, and the Consultant was listening carefully for any such alternative views. None were expressed.

That success is inseparable, in the view of those surveyed and interviewed, from the role played by the Programme Director. Her contracted tasks were to add value; provide intellectual leadership; provide a lead on engaging with potential users; provide input to public policy debates; provide a channel of communication between the ESRC and the research community; provide input to ESRC policy debates; and provide advice to the research teams and ESRC about necessary action to secure maximum value for money from the Council’s investment in the Programme.

My review of all Programme documents as well as the surveys received from Programme project holders, participants, and non-academic users indicate that these tasks were fulfilled with great distinction in each category.

The individual research projects were on the whole very well conceived, further shaped through discussions with the Director and at the Programme workshops, assiduously undertaken, and well-researched. Together they constitute the widest and most thorough exploration of the theme of non-governmental public action ever undertaken in the UK or elsewhere as part of a discrete and connected programme.

The Programme's strengths were varied and are discussed in detail in the Evaluation Report below. The few weaknesses are also identified, along with Conclusions and Recommendations for future ESRC programming.

The Recommendations include:

ESRC should consider including successful innovations such as the Practitioner Fellows and International Visiting Fellows components of the Programme in other ESRC-supported programmes, centres and projects.

ESRC should consider more widely disseminating some of the successful methods used in this Programme to link research to practice and policy, including the success of the Practitioner Fellows and International Visiting Fellows (and the progressive development of even more successful ways of managing those fellowships during the Programme term), the NGPAP/NCVO workshops; and other successful dissemination activities.

ESRC should consider supporting a longer term, competitive follow-on mechanism (in addition to the regular, shorter term ESRC follow-on funding available), given the linkages formed through this Programme between researchers and academic research with practitioners and practice, and policy makers and policy, so that these close links could be expanded and research further transferred into practice and policy, in some cases several years after the original research and linkages were formed. This could well take the form of seed funding, or matchable funding for which the match would need to be found from other sources.

ESRC should consider providing longer-term support for additional publicity and dissemination work after the formal end of the Programme for these efforts in which both academic outputs, and the links to practice and policy, will take time to develop.

ESRC should consider supporting a mechanism to develop stronger linkages between UK researchers studying international and comparative non-governmental public action, and UK researchers studying third sector research, charitable giving, and related themes in the UK context.

ESRC should consider supporting an event three to five years after the Programme has ended so that research personnel, practitioners and policy makers could reflect on how the field of non-governmental public action has developed and how the themes developed during the Programme have affected a variety of academic disciplines, along with follow-on for policy and practice initiatives arising out of the research.

ESRC should consider modifications to the evaluation process to ensure that, as the Director recommends and I concur, the Director of such a Programme “should have a role in evaluation ... [in order] to comment on the participation of grantees in the programme, research quality and the efforts of grantees in engaging with policy-makers and practitioners,” without in any way substituting for the external evaluator’s role, but as a supplement to it and to provide greater understanding of the development and success of the research projects.

ESRC should continue to address its evaluation of individual research projects to ensure that evaluators are evaluating consistently across projects; against original criteria that were established in the initial review of projects for funding; taking into account links to non-academic users and to policy and practice, which was a required part of project work; taking into account that published academic outputs may not be available at the time of the evaluation; and clarifying and making consistent the criteria for deciding on the ratings on the grading scale, including clarifying the calculation of such grades from among multiple evaluations.¹

Based on the surveys completed by Programme project holders and participants, and interviews conducted, I also concur with the Programme Director’s sense that “overall the evaluators provided very useful detail in their comments for grantees and approached this task thoughtfully. These suggestions are thus intended to improve the system further. For projects attached to research programmes, evaluators should thus be briefed about the overall objectives of the research programme so that the research project can also be evaluated within that framework. Furthermore, the criteria applying to assessing grant proposals should align with those used to assess the completed research. The criteria for assigning final grades should also be clearer to rapporteurs, as it was evident in a couple of the rapporteurs’ comments that they were struggling in deciding what grade to award.....” It is certainly possible that the new, post-November 2009 reporting and evaluation process may help deal with some of the evaluation issues that were identified by some project holders in this Programme. But I should note that there does seem to be some dissonance between a well-ordered and internally consistent process as described by ESRC and the sense on the part of some project holders that the evaluations do not proceed as effectively and consistently as they should, and that is an issue that ESRC will of course want to follow in the years ahead.

¹ As I understand it from ESRC, the project evaluation process has recently been changed in ways that may address some of the criticisms raised by project holders. I should also note that when a project has been involved in a programme, a summary written by the Programme director is included in the documentation sent to the rapporteurs. Individual project holders are also able to allude to their involvement in their final report because there is a specific section in the proforma they completed in which they can comment on it. The project evaluations primarily assess their success as an individual research project and not as part of a research programme. The contribution that those research projects made to the research programme as a whole are considered as part of the broader Programme-level evaluation.