Briefing Paper 63

UK Gypsies and Travellers and the third sector

Dr Andew Ryder, TSRC Associate Fellow

Introduction

The first record of Gypsies in Britain dates from 1502 in Scotland and in England from 1514 (Bancroft, 2005). Roma populations across Europe are members of the same ethno-social group as British Gypsies, but their ancestors settled in other European countries (mainly in Central and Eastern Europe) earlier in the migration process which started in India and culminated in this population reaching the UK five hundred years ago (Kenrick, 2004). Another principal Traveller group are the Irish Travellers. McVeigh has argued that Irish Travellers have their origins in a Celtic (and possibly pre Celtic) nomadic population in Ireland and are not Roma/Gypsies (McVeigh, 2007). Irish Travellers have travelled within the UK at least since the nineteenth century and possibly earlier (Niner, 2002: 7). This paper explores the development of the third sector amongst this minority, focusing on the experiences of Gypsies and Irish Travellers. A key concept in the paper is Ethnogenesis, a process where ethnic groups develop a heightened awareness of their identity and marginalisation and develop a greater sense of unity and political mobilisation to secure equality in wider society (Gheorghe and Mirga, 2001).

Social and civic exclusion

Ethnogenesis in an organised sense has not been an easy process for Gypsies and Travellers in the UK.

Gypsies and Travellers are one of the most excluded minorities in society, experiencing poor access to services and opportunities, acute levels of ill health and disadvantage (Cemlyn et al., 2009). One of the clearest indicators of disadvantage is that economic and social exclusion is compounded by a lack of empowerment and civic inclusion. Despite an estimated population of between 200,000 and 300,000 Gypsies and Travellers (CRE, 2006), there are no Members of Parliament from this community and only two known local authority councillors. The weak state of the Gypsy and Traveller third sector in terms of the number of established community groups amongst Gypsy and Traveller communities is again a reflection of exclusion which has hindered ethnogenesis. The National Equality Partnership has noted the challenges posed in the development of the Gypsy and Traveller third sector: 'Gypsies and Travellers come from such a low base of engagement that a huge amount of work remains to be done in helping grassroots groups to grow and develop so as to have an effective voice in society. Many

grassroots Gypsy and Traveller groups lack basic infrastructure and are thus unable to secure funding' (2008: 54).

A lack of empowerment and civic exclusion as reflected in poor levels of community organisation has been caused by structural and cultural factors. Research evidence indicates low levels of educational achievement and participation have led to Gypsies and Travellers being described as the 'most at risk group' in the education system (Wilkin et al., 2009). Low education levels can have a negative impact on attracting funding. In a recent study it was noted that high expectations from funders and statutory partners were required from the third sector in terms of organisational capacity and business skills (Equal Support 2009). Thus a lack of formal education has impeded Gypsies and Travellers' ability to influence decision making processes and create organisational structures that are sustainable and able to gather funding. Coupled with this, the Travellers Aid Trust (TAT) has noted there is a perception by Gypsy and Traveller groups that funders are hostile towards them and do not trust them to manage allotted funds (TAT, 2008). A key finding of the research by TAT in 2008 was that there may be a need for some form of dedicated capacity development worker or agency that could act as a form of 'broker' between groups and grant makers. For some groups such support has been lacking. Furthermore, with the notable exception of funders like Comic Relief and the Big Lottery, some funders have been reticent to financially support Gypsy and Traveller projects because of the negative publicity and criticism of such support by the tabloid press which funders like Comic Relief have been subjected to.

High levels of discrimination towards Gypsies and Travellers has impeded participation in a range of institutions and civic forums (CRE, 2006). Such trends have been accentuated by cultural and moral fears that Gypsies and Travellers have of the wider community (Derrington and Kendall, 2004). Ryder argues that amongst Gypsies and Travellers at the margins, bonding social capital (intense social networks) acts as a form of self help and defence against exclusion and discrimination. Through the maintenance of what Barth described as cultural boundaries, Gypsies and Travellers at times have kept their distance from mainstream society (Barth, 1975) which in turn has limited the development of formal organisations. However, unlike Okely (1983), who argued that such boundaries were based on ritualised taboo, Ryder argues that such practices are on the wane and instead notions of 'insider and outsider' are maintained through a fear of the wider community. Bonding social capital, a lack of formal education and mistrust of wider society provoked through exclusion and discrimination, has worked against community development and ethnogenesis. However, in recent years important progress has been made in developing the capacity, resources and potential of Gypsy and Traveller policy and voice groups (Cemlyn et al., 2009: 172).

The Gypsy and Traveller third sector

In recent years a number of national or local community projects have become established which have pioneered important work in community organisation and service delivery which holds the potential for replication and the eventual establishment of a wider national network of community groups. All of these groups have had difficult

histories, often lurching from one funding crisis to another as a result of short term project funding created instability within these organisations. However, in recent years, a number have entered into a period of greater stability, reflected in a broadening of the services they offer and staff employed. At a even more localised level a number of residents groups now exist on the network of 320 local authority sites.

A key development for the national organisations has been the increased level of employment of community members. In this sense, 'positive action' has played an important role. Positive action involves taking practical steps to support specific socially or economically disadvantaged communities with the purpose of helping them to achieve full and effective equality. Thus Gypsy and Traveller staff have benefitted prior to employment through targeted training and awareness raising about the organisations which employ them. For some intern positions, mentoring, volunteering or sessional employment have proven to be valuable first steps into more permanent employment positions (Ryder and Greenfields, 2010a). 'Knowledge of the community' has been listed as an essential requirement in job descriptions and is one factor that has assisted in the recruitment of community members. It should also be noted that the community groups offering positions have also effectively nurtured community staff by giving ongoing support and skills development, a process often helped by having Gypsy and Traveller staff within the organisations providing informal support networks. Here staff from the community can act as role models for new incoming staff but also understand the challenges that can be experienced by working in what for some Gypsies and Travellers will be at first difficult and challenging work environments.

Having staff from the Gypsy and Traveller community has greatly extended organisations' knowledge of the communities they serve and the effectiveness of services and outreach. It can also be argued that the employment of Gypsies and Travellers has helped some national organisations gain greater levels of trust from this community towards the organisations now employing Gypsy and Traveller staff, organisations which in the past did not always receive the full support and trust of the communities they were seeking to serve and were labeled by some to be part of a 'Gypsy industry' (Richardson and Ryder, 2012). The failure of some organisations in the past to reach out at a grassroots level to Gypsy and Traveller communities was compounded by the fact that some of the communities they tried to work with were tightly bound through bonded social capital which made them wary of outsiders, including those who sought to help (Ryder and Greenfields, 2010a, 149).

The Traveller Economic Inclusion Project found that the great majority of these newly employed Gypsy and Traveller staff are women, such work for Gypsy and Traveller females did represent radical departures from traditional notions of work which in some families has tended to emphasise that women should work within extended family networks or engage in domestic duties rather than waged employment. Employment in community organisations could present a number of other cultural challenges. An unexpected disadvantage for a number of staff is the perception of some Gypsies and Travellers that these staff are no longer fully part of the community. One young Irish Traveller stated "When I started to work here there was talk going around and people saying 'Can we trust her?' or 'Is she a kind of like a 'country person', a settled person (non-

Traveller). Is she going to be like them?' or 'Can we say this to her?' …. For a long time I was trying to work out my way to prove to them that because I'm working here it does not mean I'm not one of 'them'" (Ryder and Greenfields, 2010a, 72). Also within community groups and targeted services, Gypsies and Travellers could experience cultural tensions presented by working within new and alien work environments, centred on anxieties about their skills and education levels (Ryder and Greenfields, 2010a, 72). Thus third sector employment has not only encouraged Gypsies and Travellers to develop new skills, but also bridging forms of social capital in situations where they work, liaise and form partnerships with non-Travellers and develop essential skills needed in formalised advocacy for their communities. It is evident therefore that third sector involvement is playing a growing role in intercultural change where changes in community roles and perceptions are being gradually mediated and transformed in gender roles, work patterns and engagement with outsiders.

Some Gypsy and Traveller community groups have remained informal, lacking charitable or company status and in some cases even constitutions. For some Gypsy and Traveller activists it has, in their opinion, enabled them to remain in control of what they do. However, such informality has prevented them getting larger grants or employing staff and sadly in some cases activists have been overwhelmed by demands for help which they have selflessly tried to meet but in the process have suffered from exhaustion and stress. As a result of this, organisations have often not been able to evolve to meet growing calls for help from a highly excluded minority. As noted earlier, Gypsies and Travellers have wrongly or rightfully termed the Gypsy and Traveller third sector as part of a 'Gypsy Industry' in which outsiders, by virtue of their professionalisation, are able to carve out careers dealing with their communities but which is perceived to offer few opportunities for community members. This factor has been described as creating a ceiling which prevents Gypsies, Roma and Travellers from being able to have a meaningful role in the direction of community groups, a process described by one critic as 'NGOisation' (Trehan, 2001). Such perceptions have at times impeded opportunities for certain projects to forge meaningful links with the Gypsy and Traveller communities they serve and highlight the dangers inherent when projects do not create valid roles and a sense of ownership for community members. The author of this paper would argue that there are a growing number of models of development which demonstrate that it is possible for 'NGOisation' to be overcome. These examples show that the community itself can have a growing and meaningful role in the direction of community groups which indeed is essential if community groups hope to serve and support Gypsies and Travellers through a community development model as opposed to one based on paternalism.

For a more in-depth discussion of the issues raised in this paper and a complete list of references see TSRC Working Paper 57.