

Book review

COVID-19 and the Voluntary and Community Sector in the UK: Responses, Impacts, and Adaptation

Rees, J., Macmillan, R., Dayson, C., Damm, C., & Bynner
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This collection invites readers to reflect on the UK's Voluntary Sector experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the impact of the pandemic on voluntary sector organisations, staff, volunteers, social infrastructure, and the responses made by the sector in response to increasing financial constraints and high demand for services. In the introduction, the editors set out the wider context of the state of the voluntary sector during the pandemic, how this led to systemic shifts in Voluntary Sector Organisations' (VSOs) activities and their work, as well as the need to pay more attention to the concerns of resources and the innovative and collaborative response of the sector. The first section of the book focuses on exploring the experience and impact of the pandemic on the voluntary sector and reveals a divergence in the experiences of the voluntary sector across the four UK nations. The second part explores key policy fields and inequalities, highlighting how voluntary sector organisations reconstructed local responses to meet local demands during the pandemic, particularly grappling with the use of digital technology. The third section explores the voluntary sector's adaptive response, with contributions that attempt to engage with the implication of voluntary sector resilience, governance, networks and infrastructures, and the overall future of the sector in engaging with statutory agencies and local authorities.

This book provides many valuable insights and offers a timely and rich contribution to the scholarship on the voluntary sector. I found this book particularly impressive in bringing the limelight to the experience of BAME-led organisations and their local context, in addition to the methodological richness, such as the use of Real Time Evaluation (RTE), participatory research approach and place-based methodology.

While the book primarily focused on the UK with a potential for comparative analysis and evaluation of experiences across the four nations, there is, however, a dominance of studies emerging from England, suggesting the need for voluntary sector researchers to emphasise bringing diverse settings and stakeholders in exploring the experience and role of the voluntary sector in other nations, especially Northern Ireland. For instance, in Chapter Two, Acheson and colleagues, in the evaluation of state and non-state-supported volunteer responses to the pandemic across the four nations, reflect on how the scale of social and economic emergencies created by the COVID-19 pandemic saw an adverse effect on the sector, followed by a series of conformity within the four devolved nations in terms of operationalising voluntary action policy and social value. McDonnell, Rutherford, and Mohan, in Chapter Four, analyse the trends in the formation and dissolution of charitable organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on England, Scotland, and Wales with international comparisons.

The book also covers a diverse representation of different voluntary action experiences in the UK. For example, Smith, Coule, and King, in Chapter Five, explore the propensity of the pandemic and its associated socioeconomic challenges to the wellbeing of staff and volunteers. In Chapter Seven, MacBride and colleagues describe how voluntary sector organisations provided practical and emotional support for refugee and migrant families in Glasgow. Bailey, Sarter, and Terry's chapter (Chapter Nine) explores how voluntary sector organisations engaged in advocacy work for asylum seekers and refugees, survivors of domestic violence, homeless or vulnerable individuals, and BAME communities (including those focused on young people, education and mental health, and older people). Then, Dayson et al. give a rich insight into how the Neighbourhood Networks provided a range of activities and services to support healthy ageing in Leeds. These chapters remind readers of how voluntary sector organisations have developed effective and resilient responses in the face of the pandemic in terms of the range of activities and services provided, built a highly relational model of welfare, were responsive to members' needs and consistently provided reassurance for their members and navigated the landscape of scarce resources.

Alongside the diverse representation of the research population, the book draws out the emotions and beliefs exhibited within the voluntary and community social enterprise (VCSE) sector by highlighting the emotional impact of the pandemic on the sector. Here, the chapter of Terry, Davis and Taylor (Chapter Thirteen) uncovers how the increased demand for services and adoption of new strategies led to intense feelings of being overwhelmed and isolated, which has resulted in the need for VCSE to build safe spaces and place emphasis on the need for self-care such as taking a break from the emotional labour involved in delivering more services for less financial resources and support. This lends the book a real touch of humanity in highlighting the taken-for-granted aspect of the everyday life and wellbeing of voluntary sector workers and frontline professionals.

While the book captured a wide scope of the voluntary sector forms, one of the arguments that can leave readers in the dark is some authors' definition and conceptualisation of the voluntary sector. For example, in Chapter Fifteen, Nicols, Findlay-King, and Reid define community sport clubs (CSC) as mutual aids. The author describes mutual aids as a "volunteer-led initiative where groups of people in a particular area join together to support one another, meeting vital community needs without relying on official bodies" (p. 200). Defining community sports clubs as mutual aids may be too narrow as it is important to understand that CSCs may consist of organisational forms apart from self-help groups that may have inter-related characteristics with other concepts such as the voluntary and community sectors, depending on the purpose, size, governance structure and legal standing. However, whatever concepts authors choose,

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some implications regarding empirical and theoretical implications to the research being conducted need to be considered.

Notwithstanding, the book is well-detailed in presenting a snapshot of the experience of the voluntary sector with a detailed evaluation of the impact of the rising service demand, initial response and organisational adaptation, building of collaboration and networks, and a reflection on the impact of changes and challenges of the voluntary sector at the meso, micro and macro levels, including expectations of more collaboration between voluntary sector organisations and their respective local authorities. If this is achieved, there is a likelihood for the voluntary sector to have a more sustainable terrain, with the capacity to serve their local communities in times of crisis. Overall, this book offers immense potential and insights into the UK voluntary sector and social policies that would benefit scholars and practitioners in the field.

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