

GuideStar International Interview with Stuart Etherington Chief Executive, National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO)

Keisha Taylor (Communications Manager, GuideStar International (GSI)) had a brief chat with Stuart Etherington, Chief Executive, NCVO. Mr Etherington recently joined the board of GSI and now sits on the Advisory Council for GuideStar UK

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KT - I read in an interview that you prefer to use the term 'civil society' to describe the Third Sector or voluntary sector, why is this?

SE - There are a number of reasons why I would use that. Historically it has more value. It is about several things, it describes the space between the family, the market and the state particularly well. I think it also emphasises citizens coming together, to work together, to solve particular problems, or to run campaigns, to run services, but the citizen is at the heart of it. I think the problem with third sector is that it is a rather artificial term that we have sort of adopted because the government has encouraged us to adopt it, and I don't think it would have a lasting impact. I think civil society is a much older notion, it includes any way in which citizens come together, so whether that's associations, voluntary association, cooperatives, a whole range of different organisations, so I think it is a term which has more validity historically, it is a term which I think better describes putting citizens at the heart of voluntary action.

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KT - I read recently that the Tories have plans to probably use the term civil society.

SE - Oh yes, they are talking about having an office for civil society, which is something that we agree with. Changing the office of the Third Sector to the Office for Civil Society, so clearly the conservatives think some of these ideas have a certain resonance.

KT - What role do you think GuideStar can play in the development of civil society in the UK and abroad?

SE - Well I think GuideStar is about lots of different things. At the heart of GuideStar I think is the belief that transparency is crucial to the success of civil society. That actually people should be able to find out information about what organisations are, what they are doing, what their plans are. The assumption being that if we can create more transparent relationships between organisations and donors or activists but particularly donors, eventually we can increase the substance of support for charities. I think that is what it's for. It is also a fantastic online resource. From a very parochial point of view, it is vital in terms of analysis. We use GuideStar a lot to both market our services but also I think analyse the nature of civil society. That is very important to us. It underpins

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quite a lot of our research, so we have a very parochial interest in it. But the broader interest is the value of transparency.

KT - How do you think civil society in the UK compares with the rest of the world?

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SE - Fairly favourably I think. I have travelled a lot of the world over the years and I think it is pretty good. I think it is interesting that civil society is at different stages of development in different countries. I think the danger for the UK is that it has quite a mature civil society. There has not been oppression in England for many years, and therefore it can easily get complacent and its institutions can get mature and very complacent. I think where you see really vital civil society is where they have grown up often against the power of the state. And I think people have different views. So for example

you see in Central and Eastern Europe a growth of civil society institutions at the point at communist totalitarian regimes where overthrown. Similarly in South Africa, you see civil society actively opposing apartheid. So there is obviously a sort of vitality against the state. If the state isn't that oppressive, it's much more difficult for civil society and I think you can get caught out you can be drawn into a big tent, and it's quite difficult to work things through. Where are we now? Well I think at the moment there is a debate going on in the United Kingdom about whether the authority of the state has become too great, whether the realm or the space for civil society has been eroded too far. So there is a debate going on there, but it is less cataclysmic debate than you would have found in South Africa, or in Hungary, or in Poland, but nevertheless it is a debate and I think it is an interesting one. So I think healthy but you know the price of freedom is eternal vigilance.

Kt - In what way do you think the information gathered from a GuideStar system can be used to influence government policy and legislation?

SE - Very significantly, I can give you an example from our own experience. We use the data from GuideStar to underpin the Almanac, the publication that we produce ever year, and that really looks at what the trends are in the sector. It's really the most significant macro document there is about the sector and it draws on GuideStar. The trends that we observe from that directly inform the way in which we construct public policy. So it is evidence based. So for example one of the things that the Almanac throws up is the growth of contracting, which therefore becomes a public policy issue around contracting, the growth of the larger organisations, and the difficulties with the middle range organisations that has led directly to public policy changes. So we use it all the time to inform our public policy. We are very data oriented, so GuideStar is really important in relation to that.

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KT - In what way do you think GuideStar can ease the burden of reporting on charities; for instance to multiple donors

SE - I think it could be very important in this area. I don't think it is yet, but for example, one of the great

problems that charities complain about all the time, is that not only are they multiply regulated, but every major donor or foundation or government department wants the same information over and over again, so there is a discussion going on again about passporting and that has come up again in the Conservative policy document. GuideStar will be a good start there, if you are putting all of this information up, why aren't people using that information more to analyse, look at the particular charity

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and not demanding all the information all the time, because it's on GuideStar. I think we can do more in there, because I don't think it is as yet recognised as much as it can be by funders.

KT - How do you think civil society can embrace online spaces more effectively?

SE - A lot more... there is a lot more online resources now available. Some of it is like GuideStar which is almost value neutral, some of the online resources take a much more judgmental view about charities, they analyse and produce evidence about how effective

they are. So you get that sort of information. You have some forms of accreditation going on, online. My own view is that the most exciting online developments, is around web 2.0 developments, where basically we are constructing virtual communities in which people can interact and help make policy and help develop things, I think that sort of almost virtual civil society is actually very valuable and I think that is where it is going to go in the future.

KT - Can you express your view on the role for charities in UK at the 2012 Olympics?

SE – Well, I think again pretty important, in two ways it seems to me. I'm rather excited by the other thing that is going on around the Olympics which is going to be the cultural engagement. I think there is a lot of potential for voluntary arts organisations to be engaged and I think that's really valuable and I think that can be really important. The other thing, which I know Andrew Mawson is working on at the moment, is what is the legacy of the Olympics, how will the legacy of the Olympics be played out in terms of regeneration. Often people's experiences in East London are regeneration projects come along and there is not much long term effect but I think people like and David Robinson from Community Links and Andrew Mawson from Bromley-by-Bow, they are looking very strongly at what the legacy could be for the community.

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KT - Do you think there will be any added value as a result of the Olympics?

SE - I hope so, I hope there are community facilities, ways of sustaining community and social enterprises, all sorts of possibilities I think, infrastructure being one of them.

KT - You have recently been involved in the Carnegie UK Trust's Inquiry into the future of civil society in the UK and Ireland. Can you sum up what you think are some of the challenges and opportunities for the future of civil society not just in the UK but internationally?

SE - Well, it's very interesting because we are leaning very heavily on the Carnegie Enquiry to develop our own sort of civil society agenda. I think some of the issues are around the nature of the public realm now. In the sense, is the space for civil society being closed down? There are far less mutuals now than their use to be, there are less spaces for people to come together and debate the nature of the society, however that is constructed, it is a much more atomised society. So how can we regenerate citizens engagement, whether that be online or actual engagement, and I think that will be quite a crucial thing that comes out of that issue. Issues around climate change and social justice strikes me as things that are developing, ways of engaging younger people, in this debate much more effectively, how our new emerging leaders come through. That strikes me as quite an important component, community cohesion has got to be a major issue, how do we deal with the issue of faith groups, where they create a lot of bonding social capital together, they tend not to be bridging social capital between the groups, so cohesion in terms of race and faith. Also what is the response of civil society to, if you like the welfare debate, the wellbeing debate, an ageing population. People more actively engaged for longer what does that mean for the nature of welfare in the broadest sense. The idea that all this can be paid for throughout the public sector through taxes, is clearly a nonsense, so what is the response of civil society to that, those are some of the challenges.