

Defining Voluntary Organisations

What is a voluntary organisation?

SCVO defines voluntary organisations as non-profit driven, non-statutory, autonomous and run by individuals who do not get paid for running the organisation. Some voluntary organisations are recognised by the Inland Revenue as charities.

There are no agreed hard and fast rules for distinguishing the boundary line between voluntary and other organisations. However, the following exclusions are based on the notion that the voluntary sector represents a unique value system. Even within the set of organisations that hold to this value system, there are particular exclusions made for pragmatic reasons.

Exclusions

There are two key tests that we have used to distinguish voluntary organisations from other organisations:

1. Does the organisation represent a for-profit driven rather than public benefit motivation?
2. Does the organisation aim to satisfy an exclusive and private objective (or conviction) rather than a shared benefit?

The first test excludes the following:

- Private sector organisations - A key feature of voluntary organisations is that they are ultimately directed by individuals who do not make their living from their involvement in running the organisation. This naturally excludes most private sector businesses.
- Financial institutions - such as large building societies and friendly societies (eg Standard Life). These organisations are mutuals, but their overriding aim is to generate profit, rather than address a social need.

The second test excludes the following:

- Political parties and groups campaigning on a method of governance rather than to address a particular social need. It can be argued that at the grand level of things, political groups set up to address social need in its widest sense and are thus voluntary associations. However, public opinion has long determined that political activity is not seen as a public, rather than private, objective, and as such political parties are conventionally considered distinct to the voluntary sector. Nevertheless, certain civic participation groups and pressure groups campaigning on a specific social need, on behalf of excluded groups are included.
- Note that there are a significant number of Scottish charities set up as quangos or quasi non-governmental organisations. These organisations are essentially controlled by the public sector and set up by statute. Consequently, they also cannot be regarded as voluntary sector.

- Academic sector, such as universities and colleges are also excluded. It is argued that these organisations are predominantly funded by the public sector (UK Almanac 2002 – see bibliography).
- Faith based organisations, such as churches which are charitable, have a primarily religious motivation. Some faith-based organisations also set up projects that are separately constituted to address specific social needs, and these are included as voluntary sector. However, religious activity in isolation is not regarded as voluntary sector as it is an exclusive and private objective, similar to political motivation.
- Organisations officially recognised as trade unions are excluded from our definition on pragmatic grounds. The main trade unions have their own voice as a sector and are often politically motivated. However, some smaller unions of individuals, such as professional associations or business support groups are included in this voluntary sector definition.
- Private independent schools – some private schools are financially exclusive. Even if they redirect all their profit back into the school, they are arguably not driven for public benefit. Those schools which are clearly not aimed at public benefit are excluded from our voluntary sector definition.

Other terms used to describe the sector

The ‘social economy’ is a term increasingly used in relation to the voluntary sector. The phrase social economy is used to describe the economic dimension of voluntary sector activity. But while it can lead to a policy focus on some specific parts of the sector, it is not limited to those organisations that most closely emulate private sector operations known as social enterprises.

The ‘Third Sector’ is another term used to refer to the voluntary sector. A perspective based on work carried out by the CBS Network (2002) defines the Third Sector as all constituted organisations, plus the family economy, as set apart from the statutory and private sectors, and as such voluntary organisations are predominant within it.

Regulated voluntary sector

The ‘regulated voluntary sector’ is a subset of the voluntary sector, that comprises voluntary sector charities, housing associations and credit unions. Each of these type of organisation is subject to regulation and their presence is thus recorded by the UK Inland Revenue, Communities Scotland or the UK Financial Services Authority respectively. This makes it possible to carry out a more detailed statistical analysis of this part of the sector. All statistics in this almanac specifically relate to the regulated voluntary sector, unless otherwise indicated.