How does problem context matter for cross-sector collaboration? A comparative study of voluntary sector engagement in children’s services and flood management

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Collaboration between the UK’s voluntary organisations (VOs) and public agencies is often viewed through the lens of the state’s changing role in service delivery, and the outsourcing of the ‘welfare state’. However, the engagement of VOs with the ‘environmental state’ has a very different history. In this comparative study, we contrast cross-sector collaboration in children’s services (‘welfare state’) with the more recent collaboration in flood management (‘environmental state’). We ask whether, and if so how, these different inter-organizational domains set up different expectations for cross-sector collaboration. We argue that the different histories of state involvement in these domains have implications for understanding how collaborative partnerships develop, which partners are engaged, how local...
communities become involved, and how power dynamics play out between actors from different sectors. Understanding the implications of these different state contexts may enable VOs engaged in flood management partnerships to avoid some of the challenges encountered by VOs in the welfare domain.

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**How does problem context matter for cross-sector collaboration? A comparative study of voluntary sector engagement in children’s services and flood management.**

**Introduction**

Collaboration between the UK’s voluntary organisations (VOs) and public agencies is often viewed through the lens of the state’s changing role in service delivery, and the outsourcing of the ‘welfare state’. However the engagement of VOs with the ‘environmental state’ has a very different history. In this comparative study, we contrast cross-sector collaboration in children’s services, as an example of the ‘welfare state’, with the more recent collaboration in flood management, as an example of the ‘environmental state’. We ask whether, and if so how, these different inter-organizational domains set up different expectations for cross-sector collaboration. We argue that the different histories of state involvement in these domains have implications for understanding how collaborative partnerships develop, which partners are engaged, and how power dynamics play out between actors from different sectors. More specifically, these different histories are shaped by related but distinctive ideas, institutions, and power interests (Gough, 2015). Understanding the implications of these different state contexts may enable VOs engaged in flood management partnerships to avoid some of the challenges encountered by VOs in the welfare domain.

The paper has two origins – first in the authors’ practice experience and ongoing practice-focused research, and second in our theoretical interest in cross-sector collaboration. Our practice focus originates in our professional experiences in the different domains of childcare and flood...
management. In early discussions we noted strong parallels, not only in the substantive issues faced by practitioners, but also in the dilemmas faced and challenges arising from adopting a collaborative approach to tackling the challenges of children’s services and flood management. We also noted some apparent differences. In a recent conference paper exploring these differences from a public leadership perspective (Jacklin-Jarvis and Potter, 2017), we particularly noted the different roles played by VOs in these collaborations. Our research objectives are to understand the reason for these similarities and differences; and to present these insights to practitioners to enable reflective practice.

From a theoretical perspective, our initial review of the literature of inter-organisational collaboration highlighted an absence of discussion as to how a specific policy domain shapes the structure, processes, and outcomes of collaboration. Arguably, this literature arises primarily from the social welfare domain, but works from a broad assumption that insights regarding the management of collaboration can be transferred across policy contexts. It is concerned with highlighting the common themes that arise in managing collaboration, rather than the distinctive drivers and characteristics of different inter-organisational domains (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

In this paper, we turn to political science for insight into how and why cross-sector collaboration in different social policy domains might develop in different ways, and how this might impact on VOs in different domains. Our research questions are therefore,

What role does social policy domain play in the ways in which public/voluntary sector collaborative partnerships develop and are managed?

What are the implications for VOs engaged in cross-sector collaboration in a policy domain?

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we outline some of the issues that arise from our observation of the two policy domains and of VO engagement in these domains. Then we introduce the political science literature that we draw on for this paper, focusing on the different histories of the welfare and environmental states. This leads to a brief account of methodology. Finally, we discuss the insights this political science framework gives us for understanding the development of cross-sector collaboration and VO engagement in each domain. As this research is ongoing, our reflections in this paper are necessarily tentative and emergent, but begin to outline a direction for further research.

Background: Practice observations

Our initial observations derive from our professional careers prior to entering academia and our consequent practice-focused academic research (Jacklin-Jarvis, 2013; Jacklin-Jarvis and Potter, 2017; Potter, 2012). In particular, we focus on three observations as follows.

First, we observe that the relatively recent cross-sector partnerships of the ‘Catchment Based Approach’ to flood management are led almost exclusively by VOs, such as Rivers and Wildlife Trusts. This is in marked contrast to the situation in children’s services. Here the proliferation of cross-sector collaborative partnerships since 1997 (Percy-Smith, 2005) have been led primarily by public agencies, specifically local authorities who carry legal responsibilities for child protection, adoption, and coordination of child wellbeing services.

Second, we note that the domain of flood management is not characterised by the commissioning relationships that overlay and are intertwined with cross-sector collaboration in the children’s services field. This changes the interdependencies between public and voluntary sectors. It also means that the coexistence of competition and collaboration that characterises cross-sector working
in children’s services (Milbourne, 2013) is not (at least for the moment) present in the flood management domain.

Third, we observe the somewhat different engagement of private sector interests in the policy domain of flood management. The interests of private landowners and developers have been to the forefront of flood management from its inception as a policy domain. In contrast, private interests have been admitted to the table only recently in children’s services as a result of the increase in the outsourcing of services previously provided by the state.

A key question that emerges from these observations is whether these differences can simply be accounted for by suggesting that the domains of children’s services and flood management are at different points in the same developmental trajectory. In other words, will flood management collaboration inevitably see increasing public sector dominance and the introduction of state commissioning of VS services over time? Or are there factors that make these two social policy domains inherently different contexts for cross-sector collaboration?

‘Welfare state’ and ‘environmental state’

In this section of the paper, we draw on the literature of political science to begin to explore factors that impact on the development of cross-sector collaboration in a policy domain, and consequently on the engagement and development of VOs. We turn to political science because our reading of the collaboration literature helped us to understand similarities, and the broad themes that are consistent across collaborations, but gave us less insight into how policy domain contributes to the different shaping of structures and processes of collaboration within that domain.

The complexity of state/VS collaboration plays out in an historical socio-political context that is broadly characterised as neoliberalism. However, political science theorists argue that there is a distinction to be made between different incarnations of the neoliberal state – specifically the ‘welfare state’ and the ‘environmental state’ (Gough, 2015; Meadowcroft, 1999). A comparison of these different social policy domains highlights their different histories of state activity. In the UK, the so-called ‘welfare state’ predates the ‘environmental state’ by up to a century. In the nineteenth century, industrial capitalism brought social challenges with new resources to tackle them, welfare expanded and became an established feature in the post-second world war period (Gough, 2015). In contrast the environmental state developed later from the 1970s, initially through law, regulation, and policy to clean up the polluted environment; and later linked with broader social and economic concerns from the late 1980s under the banner of ‘sustainable development’ (Meadowcroft, 1999).

In the light of these contrasts, Gough (2015) calls for research across social welfare and environmental domains, arguing that the development of the welfare state, with its associated body of scholarship, provides interesting parallels and lessons for environmental researchers studying the more recent emergence of the ‘environmental state’.

Gough’s (2015) initial comparative work identifies common drivers in welfare and environmental states; these include globalisation and internationalisation, the rising power of capital and business, and the continuing dominance of neo-liberal ideas. While he assesses neo-liberalism as a ‘block to progress’ in both domains (ibid p.37). Gough argues that the other factors work somewhat differently in each domain. International linkages favour the environmental state but weaken the welfare state; business interests weaken welfare and may block climate programmes. However, the impact of business on the environmental state is dependent on the specific balance of power interests in each country. More specifically, the constellation of ideas, power interests, and institutions is somewhat different within welfare and environmental states. These drive state
engagement in each social policy domain. They also impact on the engagement of non-state actors in each domain, including VOs (ibid p.33).

In this paper, we take up Gough’s conclusions to focus more specifically on the ways in which the constellation of ideas, institutions, and power interests in a social policy domain impacts on VO engagement in collaborative working with public sector agencies. In doing so, we begin to argue for a greater focus on socio-political context in collaboration theory.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for this ongoing research agenda takes the form of comparative case studies of the policy domains of children’s services (‘welfare state’) and flood management (‘environmental state’). This comparative work proceeded through secondary analysis of our previous separate work in the two policy domains (Jacklin-Jarvis, 2013; Potter, 2012). Each of these studies combined discourse analysis of policy with qualitative fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews and observation, in addition to secondary reading. Here we interpret the two case examples through the lens of Gough’s constellation of institutions, ideas, and power interests. However, this should be seen as a stage of iterative analysis that is rooted in our identity as engaged researchers (Van de Ven, 2007). In other words, we are ultimately interested in insights that both build theory and are of use to practitioners.

Cross-sector collaboration in two policy domains

Following Gough (2015), we focus on the institutions, power interests and ideas observed in our ongoing empirical work in the two domains of flood management and children’s services, presented here as two case studies of cross sector relationships in a policy domain. While Gough focuses on the ways in which institutions, power interests and ideas frame state activity in each domain, we particularly highlight the ways in which these frame VO engagement – first historically and then in the present day.

Flood defence: institutions, power interests, and ideas

Attempts to control urban rivers can be traced back to the 18th century and linked to the pursuit of growth and accumulation of capital. The Land Drainage Act of 1930 gave engineers strong powers and financial resources to eliminate ‘vast unhealthy washes and ‘swamps’ to modernise and expand agricultural production. Shock events, such as the dramatic East Coast storm of 1953, led to major state investment in engineering-led structural flood defence solutions – dikes, dams, reservoirs and diversions built to protect homes and prevent repeat floods. This focus on the idea of defence and corresponding dominance of engineering was challenged by other disciplines (ecologists, geographers and planners). However, as development land in cities became increasingly valuable, the central concern remained a technical one; to straighten and encase streams and rivers to decrease flood risk to make way for development and land owning interests (Novotny et al., 2010)

From the late 1980s and early 1990s, the ideas of environmentalism and sustainable development mobilised campaigns to rally strongly against the dominant pro-development agenda. This move was led largely by voluntary organisations, such as the National Trust, RSPB, and Rivers Trusts, focused on the issue of loss of habitats in rivers and wetlands. In addition, EU Directives (2000, 2001) provided regulatory levers to safeguard certain habitats and species. Furthermore, the idea of ‘sustainable development’ began to challenge the dominant flood defence engineering discourse by highlighting the lack of integration and silo thinking of different sectors.
Further shock flood events between the 1990s and 2007 led to increased policy responsiveness to ecological arguments made by VOs. Defra’s 2005 strategy ‘Making space for water’ aligned with the UK’s sustainable development strategy ‘Securing the future’. Flood management moved towards a partnership approach that takes into account different sorts of knowledge and provides a framework for debate. In spite of this shift towards governance by partnership, attempts at policy integration are constrained by power differentials and a long-term bias towards structural engineering solutions (Potter 2012).

To better protect communities, homes, and farmland against flood threat, current government policy frames the challenge in terms of the need to rebalance and share management and responsibility for risk in a collaboration between the state, individuals, civil society, and business (Defra 2016). Long term environmental planning views natural catchments as the building block for integrated delivery and decision-making. This requires ‘joined-up’ action at a local level, bringing together business, environmental VOs and other state and non-state actors – harnessing energy and enthusiasm through connections with nature (Defra 2016). At this local level, the ‘Catchment Based Approach’ is led almost exclusively by voluntary organisations, such as Rivers and Wildlife Trusts, who facilitate collaborative partnerships and coordinate the endeavour to achieve water quality targets. CABA partnerships are funded by the National Lottery, and therefore not directly dependent on state funding.

At the national level, following Pitt’s (2008) recommendation, the Environment Agency (EA) has responsibility for strategic overview for flood risk management and is responsible for regulating flood management activities on main rivers. Within the Environment Agency, biologists, ecologists, planners, hydrologists, and engineers work together, but draw on different modes of reason, conceptions of science, and how it is practiced. This demonstrates the fundamental difficulty in reaching any agreement about the nature of the problem, and agreeing who or what is being protected – communities, ecology, but undoubtedly not protection for the rivers to flood naturally. Current proposals are in place for a proposed National Floods Commissioner whose role will ensure a cross-government focus, whilst taking a more objective and balanced, long-term view of flood risk.

Children’s services: Institutions, power interests, and ideas

The history of children’s services has its roots in the children’s charities of the 19th century, as service providers and as campaigning organisations. The historical archives of large VOs tell a narrative of transition from charitable provision of care and accommodation for the abandoned, orphaned, and poor to 21st century preventative outreach services. Through 19th century legislation and the introduction of the welfare state in the 1940s, the state became the primary protector and provider of the nation’s children. At this point, few charities received state funding (Prochaska, 2006).

The policy endeavour to achieve ‘integrated’ children’s services can be seen as far back as the 1960s, with the Seebohm report (1968) and consequent introduction of local social work departments in 1971. Parton (2009) traces this endeavour to integrate services through to Labour’s 2008 ‘Think Family’ policy to coordinate packages of support services around families in need – regardless of sector provider. This 40 year period has been characterised by a proliferation of policy-led collaborative processes and structures, centred around two key ideas – ‘protection’ and ‘prevention’, each with somewhat different implications for state and non-state actors (Parton, 2004; Parton, 2009; Parton, 2012). While the policy discourse of protection focuses primarily on the coordination of state actors (social work, police, and health), the prevention discourse particularly draws attention to the role of VOs who keep children from entering state protection services (see for example Allen, 2011a).
This 40 year policy narrative is punctuated by successive governments’ Working together documents which first appear in 1974 and continue (at date) to 2015. Working together constitutes statutory guidance on inter-agency responsibilities and processes for information sharing and service coordination for children at risk of harm. The continuity of the working together policy discourse constitutes child protection as an inherently inter-agency collaborative domain (Parton 2011), coordinated by Local Safeguarding Boards (LSCBs). While the latter are led by local authorities, and attended by a range of public agencies, the guidance requires representation from VOs on the LSCB.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the continuing endeavour to integrate services for children led to a proliferation of continually dynamic policy-led collaborative structures alongside the LSCB. These focused on the idea of prevention rather than rescue - including Children’s Trusts, Early Years and Childcare Partnerships, and Youth Justice Partnerships. While many of these structures have been short-lived, with somewhat variable impact on services, they have each had a remit to engage with VOs. As importantly, the rise and demise of these partnerships has taken place in the broader social welfare context characterised by moves towards the marketization of supportive social services. For example, local authorities have a duty to manage the ‘market’ of childcare services – services that at least until the early 2000s were primarily delivered by VOs. While this process of the marketisation of ‘prevention’ has resulted in significant transfer of additional preventative services to VOs, it is only more recently that ‘protection’ social work services have begun to be commissioned outside of public agencies (Jones, 2015). Private organisations must establish non-profit subsidiaries to bid for this work, blurring the boundary between private and voluntary organisations, and in the view of some commentators representing ‘an end game for publicly provided children’s social services’ (ibid p.463).

In its most recent iteration, Working Together (HMG 2015) reasserts the importance and responsibilities of LSCBs as collaborative cross-sector partnerships led by local authorities. It also attempts to construct a single narrative that links together ‘prevention’ and ‘protection’ as a continuum of child-centred integrated services across all sectors. Since 2004, this child-centred approach (Children Act 2004, 2014) has been reinforced by the appointment of a Children’s Commissioner for England tasked with promoting and protecting children’s rights at the national level (www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk).

Discussion

In this discussion section, we reflect on the ways in which the particular constellation of ideas, institutions and power interests (Gough, 2015) in children’s services and flood management impacts on the engagement of VOs in each domain and collaboration with public sector agencies. We make three inter-related points – first, we argue that interdependency between state and sector plays out differently in each domain; second that the outworking of the idea of marketization has given rise to different institutional arrangements in each domain that reflect different power interests in a context of increasingly scarce public resources; third that the key central idea of ‘protection’ that is common to both domains is one around which there is greater cross-sector consensus in children’s services but greater potential for voluntary sector-led interpretation in flood management. We then comment briefly on the potential for exploring further the ways in which a social policy domain frames cross-sector collaboration through a focus on this constellation.

The welfare and environmental states are at somewhat different places in their historical trajectory and consequently in determining first what the state’s responsibilities are for each of these problem domains, and second how those responsibilities should be carried out. This has consequences for the ways in which interdependency of state and VOs plays out in each domain. Although both are
characterised by structures and processes of cross-sector collaboration, there are significant differences in voluntary sector engagement that can be explained, at least in part, in terms of this historical trajectory. The policy domain of flood management has come to the fore in the UK as the idea of the welfare state is challenged and its institutions are dismantled in the context of government’s continuing prioritisation of economic growth (Gough 2015). A collaborative approach to flood management is being developed at a greater distance from state institutions, with opportunities for VOs to lead the development of local collaborative arrangements and to frame the ideas of protection and resilience that inform those arrangements.

On the other hand, environmental ideas and goals often challenge and conflict with the dominant economic framework (ibid). Vested land owning and property interests, with neoliberal ideological links with neighbouring government departments (CLG and Treasury), means the commitment to economic growth plays out in unsustainable development of the floodplain. This sets up somewhat different expectations for what can be achieved through a collaborative approach rather than direct public management, given land owners and developers, in their pursuit of profit, lack time and inclination to contribute to policy innovation and sit at the collaborative table. This raises enormous challenges for VOs tasked with leading collaborative flood management partnerships.

Furthermore, the neoliberal idea of marketization plays out in each domain against this context of different history, power interests, and state institutions. In children’s services, marketization is primarily seen in the move towards the outsourcing of welfare state services. The commissioning of services for children has opened up opportunities for VOs over the last 25 years, offering opportunities for them to contribute to and shape service delivery. It has also increased the complexity of state/VS interdependency, as the financial value of public sector commissioning of VOs initially increased, then decreased as a consequence of austerity. In the post-recession period since 2008, children’s VOs that have contracted with the state have faced the same challenges of independence and sustainability as others in the social welfare domain (Independence Panel, 2015). However, interdependency has not played out in the same way in flood management. The policy drivers and statutory basis for collaborative working in flood management came to the fore after the flood events of 2007 and subsequent findings of the Pitt Review (2008). Flood management partnerships have therefore developed in the context of public sector austerity. VOs leading these partnerships are not funded directly by the state, and as a consequence, they are not in the same market relationship with state agencies. However, marketization is impacting the development of flood management partnerships through the state’s continuing focus on economic growth and the need for development.

These differences are seen in the different institutional arrangements that both enable and constrain collaboration in each domain at local and national levels, and the power interests that influence the development of those institutional arrangements. At this early stage of our research, we note the need for further investigation of the institutional arrangements that are emerging in both domains, and the impact on local collaborative partnerships. For the moment, we note the significance of legislation and regulation in each domain; the role played by democratic state institutions (particularly local authorities); the significance of non or quasi-governmental institutions, such as the Environment Agency; and the roles of commissioners. We surmise that these different institutional arrangements impact on the ways local collaboration is structured, the different roles adopted by participants, and the processes of agenda-setting, strategizing and decision-making that move those collaborations forward.

Finally, we reflect on the ways in which the key common idea of ‘protection’ impacts cross-sector collaboration in each domain and consequently VO engagement. In children’s services, ‘protection’
is established as a state responsibility, and is defined in successive legislation, with statutory
guidance (Working together) for cross-sector collaboration in place since 1974. Although, this
commitment and clear accountability framework arguably masks the idea of ‘prevention’ that has
been associated with the flexibility and innovation of VOs (see for example Allen 2011), it at least
offers a clear focus for collaborative working and the continued development of institutional
arrangements. However, in flood management, the idea of ‘protection’ is still very much open to
debate – who or what are we working together to protect, and why? The unresolved nature of
these questions relates to the power interests and disciplinary focus of players in the flood
management domain – in particular the historical dominance of engineering and the building of
flood ‘defences’. This has some similarity to Gough’s (2015) assertion that science and scientists
play a role in defining, measuring, modelling, and mitigating climate change in a manner that is
unparalleled in the social policy arena. Although we note some similarity in the child protection
domain in terms of the involvement of medics and medical science, we suggest that the mix of
scientific ideas and private interests in the flood management domain has no direct parallel in
children’s services. Again, this raises particular challenges for VOs endeavouring to lead
collaborative flood management partnerships with a focus on ecology and the protection of the local
environment.

Conclusion

We conclude this exploratory paper by re-focusing on the implications for VOs that collaborate with
the state in a particular social policy domain. We suggest that understanding the particular
constellation of ideas, institutions, and power interests in a social policy domain will give some
insight into how the structures and processes of collaboration play out across an historical
trajectory. We encourage VOs to explore this constellation in their own social policy domain, but
also to compare and contrast that domain with other areas of social policy with a somewhat
different history of state activity and VS engagement. We note the need to take care in drawing
generalised conclusions about how state/VO collaboration may progress over time. However, we
also note that the challenge to protect children was led by VOs in the 19th century, the role of
primary protector then moved to the state, and it is now moving back towards a more collaborative
but contested shared responsibility. We wonder therefore if it is simply a matter of time before the
VS-led flood management partnerships become a site of competition, or if this can be avoided.

From a research perspective, this initial study confirms that there is much to be gained from
comparative studies of collaboration in different policy domains. It provides direction for the next
stage of the research as we explore further the interactions between ideas, institutions, and power
interests, and begin to theorise this social policy constellation as significant for cross-sector
collaboration.

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