EDITORIAL

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Introduction

The articles in this issue of the Third Sector Review focus, in different ways, on demonstrating and measuring how much third sector organisations achieve for society in pursuing their purposes. This is a tricky matter to address as there are typically a range of different variables that could be measured and various external factors that may contribute to or detract from achievement (Productivity Commission 2010: 48-52; Nicholls et al. 2012: 28-62). Despite these difficulties, Alan Lockyer examines performance evaluation of non-profit organisation programmes in the first article in this issue, while Brendan Long investigates the economic impact of religiosity in the second article.

Alan Lockyer’s article is entitled ‘New Zealand Non-Profit Organisation Responses to Programme Evaluation Characterisations, Capacity, Evaluation Self-Reflection, Evaluation Barriers and Necessary Resources’. It involves a quantitative study examining the extent of and influences on performance evaluation of non-profit organisation programmes in a New Zealand context. Lockyer finds that New Zealand non-profit organisations are conducting and wish to conduct more programme evaluation, but that non-profit organisations do not always have institutional plans for programme evaluation and that there is need for greater human and financial resources to support evaluation efforts. Building on these key findings, Lockyer suggests that further research should be conducted to determine the degree to which and manner in which, non-profit organisations actively seek funding from government or the public to perform evaluation activities.

In ‘Measuring Religious Volunteering and Donation Behaviour in Australia’, Dr Brendan Long unpacks the gaps in current Australian evaluations of the economic impact of religiosity. In particular, Long explains how the Study for the Economic Impact of Religion on Society (SEIROS) has sponsored specific econometric modelling on this topic by Deloitte Access Economics, in order to fill the gaps. However, Long
analyses that modelling to suggest areas for improvement. Specifically, Long discusses the ways in which modelling could better conceive of degrees of religiosity based on levels of attendance at religious events – while still dealing with collinearity issues; and by moving beyond measurement of the ‘treatment effect’ whereby the economic impact is based on the observed difference between the (very small) percentage of adults who convert to being religious versus those who remain irreligious all their lives. These insights are especially pertinent as SEIROS continues to advance its research programme in this space.

The issue also contains several papers from the field corresponding to the theme of ‘charities & crises: impacts and responses’. Recent times have witnessed a series of profound crises: health and economic (COVID-19), social (mosque shootings in New Zealand and Black lives matter protests) and environmental (Australian bushfires). These crises are causing material disruption to the way that charities raise revenue and carry out their activities (see, e.g. Social Ventures Australia and Centre for Social Impact 2020). This poses both challenges and opportunities for funders, charities and regulators. For instance, how have giving patterns changed in response? Is there a need for greater consumer protection for emotive crowd-funding responses to severe crises?

In ‘The Role of the Attorney-General in Legal Proceedings Involving Charities and Charitable Trusts: The NSW Rural Fire Service Case’, Jon Cheung and Nameeta Chandra investigate an aspect of comedian Celeste Barber’s wildly successful social media fundraising response to the 2019-20 Australian bushfires. The bushfire crisis engendered a large response from donors in Australia and around the world, but it seems that many donors may have wanted their donations to go to a broader range of recipients than the actual recipient – the trustees of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service Fund. The Fund had been nominated as the donation recipient by Ms. Barber, although PayPal Giving Fund, which acted as the intermediary collection point for social media donations, was not legally obliged to pass on all the donations to the Fund. Some statements by Ms. Barber and by donors referred to helping firefighters and those who lost homes in Victoria, as well as to helping animals affected by the fires, matters outside the scope of the Fund’s charitable objects. This sort of confusion is likely to become more common as social media use increases and with greater reliance on intermediaries such as the PayPal Giving Fund to receive the social media donations and pass them onto a nominated recipient. Cheung and Chandra analyse the role of the
Attorney-General in regulating and protecting charities, so as to discuss what might reasonably have been expected of the Attorney-General when the trustees of the Fund sought court directions about what the Fund could do with the donations it had received. Cheung and Chandra emphasise the limits on the Attorney-General’s role in this situation and suggest a range of practical guidance measures that practitioners, donors and fundraisers should adopt in relation to future social media fundraising appeals.

The second paper responding to crises and charities is Taylor and Donoghue’s ‘The Big Issue: Is it Sustainable in a Cashless Society?’. Taylor and Donoghue examine a significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: the marked shift to cashless payments. For street vendors experiencing or at risk of homelessness and for whom Big Issue magazine sales are a main form of income, non-cash transactions present a range of challenges. The authors apply a sustainability lens to the Big Issue organisation in the UK to generate recommendations to address the challenges. While grounded in the UK experience, Taylor and Donoghue emphasise the global nature of the problem and identify the implications for other countries, such as Australia, which also has Big Issue vendors.

While not directly connected to the crisis theme, Louise Lee’s paper from the field is inspired by the twin crises of food waste and food insecurity. ‘Being Moved by ‘Surplus’ Food - Reflections of a Food Rescue Volunteer and Researcher’ is a self-reflection by Lee on volunteering with and researching food rescue organisations. Lee discusses how her hands-on experience helped prompt questions about whether food rescue is an appropriate response to food waste, or whether it masks broader societal questions about the distribution of resources, both within and between generations. Lee’s paper is a reminder of the benefits that can flow to third sector researchers from a deeper understanding of third sector organisations themselves.

REFERENCES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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