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Third Sector Study Group

**The adoption of strategic management by third sector organizations. Findings from a census of third sector organizations in Northern Ireland and further behavioural questions.**

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## Introduction

Strategic management has attracted interest from a wide range of academic commentators interested in its adoption in the third sector. From the late 1970s a steady stream of publications have appeared dealing with the third sector and its relationship to strategic management. (Hofer 1976; Batsleer et al 1992; Osborne 1996; and Davis Smith 1995; Hudson 1995; Hynd 1995; Clutterbuck and Dearlove 1996; Courtney 1996; Hussey & Perrin 2003; and Paton 2003) But for good reasons the relationship between the nominally 'democratic' basis of organising voluntary activity and the supposed 'empirical' processes associated with strategic management is perceived as a source of tension.

This paper draws on data collected as part of a doctoral research programme undertaken between 1999-2004. The project sought to examine in some depth issues relating to the adoption and perceived uses of strategic management in the third sector. Survey derived data collected between 2002-3 on voluntary sector organizations in Northern Ireland is used to measure the extent and pattern of adoption of strategic management. All 160 voluntary sector organizations in Northern Ireland with a turnover of over £100,000 per annum were included in a census used to gather data. An 80% response rate (128 respondents in total) was achieved using chief executives as the main respondent in each organization. The study collected a broad set of data relevant to understanding the factors related to the adoption of strategic management.

Much of research literature is preoccupied with similarities and differences between private and third sector organizations in relation to strategic management. A debate developed between those who acknowledge the relevance of strategic management to the third sector (Karger and Malik 1975; Keating 1979; Firstenberg 1979; Selby 1978; Steiner 1979; Drucker 1980; Greenberg 1982; Unterman and Davis 1982; Hatten 1982) and those who regarded the missions of third sector organizations as rendering strategic management inappropriate. (Newman and Wallender 1983; Kanter and Summers 1987; Bryson 1994; Rochester 1995 McLaughlin 1986; Bryson 1988; Salipante and Golden-Biddle 1995). This latter school of thought considers strategic management to be rather too closely linked to 'change' for organizations that fundamentally are concerned to stress the enduring nature of 'need'. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are concerns over a tension between 'volunteering', 'inclusiveness', 'valuing staff' and an adoption of a 'private sector' ethos and practice. (Mason 1984; Leat 1995; Knight 1993). Also of concern was the lack of convincing evidence to determine that adoption is motivated by calculative judgements on the attainment of benefits associated with specific strategic management practices.

It is clear that from the early 1980s onwards there was a perceived need on the part of third sector organizations to respond to a managerialist political agenda which stressed a more 'business-like' approach and tended to demand a particular style of organizational conduct (Osborne and McLaughlin 2002). In the United Kingdom third sector organizations were required to become more quality and cost conscious as a 'contract culture' took root. (Lewis 1996, Deakin 1996, Gann 1996, Rochester 1995; Hudson 1995; Power 1997) More recently New Labour's introduction of 'Best Value' and then 'Comprehensive Performance Assessment' has placed further managerialist demands on third sector organizations with contractual links to the public sector. (Joyce 1999; McLaughlin et al 2002; Wilson and Game 2002)

### **The voluntary sector and strategic management – initial observations from the Northern Ireland study.**

It was thought that strategic management had been adopted extensively by many third sector organizations. This was confirmed by initial research into the management practices of organisations in Northern Ireland. The study collected a broad spectrum of data relating to the issue of adoption of strategic management practices. This included age and size of the organizations, the percentage of organizations which had a strategic plan, profiles of the content of strategic plans, the range of strategic analysis processes used, the extent to which implementation guidance processes were in use and the breadth of staff/trustee/volunteer participation in strategic planning. Data was also collected on the chief executives' perceptions of benefits accruing from engaging in strategic management and where relevant, their reasons for not engaging in strategic management. This rich data field established clearly that strategic management had become an essential element in the governance of third sector organizations in Northern Ireland.

The data was subsequently examined to discover more about chief executives' relationship to strategic management with a view to exploring whether or not these leaders of important voluntary organizations entertained any 'resistance' to strategic management as suggested in academic discourse.

Results from the study which are of particular interest reveal the reasons given by chief executives for engaging in strategic management, their views on the positive and negative impacts of strategic management, the component parts of strategies adopted in the third sector and the relationship between behaviours associated with strategic management (analysis, formulation of plans and implementation guidance) and perceived organizational effectiveness.

### **A power perspective**

The decision to examine the adoption of strategic management by the voluntary sector from a power perspective arose through the identification of key

behavioural questions relating to chief executives. On initial analysis of the data it appeared that at least some were 'positive' adopters of strategic management for reasons consistent with managerialist views on organizational control. Were however some chief executives being pressured into adoption of strategic management by the government funders with whom resource dependency relationships were very apparent? Also certain aspects of the initial analysis suggested that there was a strong possibility that other chief executives were rather less than fully conscious about their own and their organizations reasons for adopting strategic management. In particular it was not clear if chief executives decided to adopt strategic management approaches following a process of independent decision making (relating to the associated benefits of strategic management in relation to problems they faced), or whether their decisions reflected external pressure from funders or some other process such as adopting behaviour observed elsewhere in the third sector. In attempting to answer this question it was clear that a complex set of forces needed to be understood. In short the aim was to discover whether third sector chief executives embraced strategic management through behavioural processes dominated by coercion, choice or ideology.

As a result of being sensitised to the contested explanations for adoption, the researchers became interested in applying a Lukesian perspective on the power position occupied by leaders of voluntary organizations in relation to strategic management. (Lukes 1974; Hardy 1994). In his seminal publication Lukes conceived power in three dimensions. Lukes's 'first dimension' is characterised by open disagreements or acts of persuasion where one actor succeeds in securing domination through decisions that are positive with respect to their own values or interest position. In the case of the voluntary sectors adoption of strategic management we would expect to see evidence of first dimension power relations in the form of chief executive led resistance to instructions to conform with strategic management systems probably followed by a mixture of coercion or persuasion tactics on the part of the state, possibly in alliance with management consultants. Lukes also wished to identify and understand forms of power which did not create observable issues of conflict of values or interests between competing actors. He wished to capture the "non-observable" impact of coercive relationships which resulted in subservient actors choosing not to fight commands which they believed were detrimental to their own position. In this circumstance of agenda control by the dominant actor, Lukes conceived power being exercised through what he termed the 'second dimension'.

In the case under examination we might anticipate instances of suppressed conflict over the adoption of strategic management, with the voluntary sector unwillingly succumbing to perceived threat associated with non-compliance. This type of power is less easily detectable than power exercised in the first dimension and presents methodological issues for researchers. Lukes also wished to incorporate within his model those relationships which are moulded

by strong ideological forces which obscure influences working away on actors in social systems, resulting in their non-awareness of their own value or interest position in relation to a particular action or broader relationship. This Lukes termed the 'third dimension' of power. In these circumstances the hegemonic force of state sponsored managerialism could be expected to cause chief executives of voluntary organisations to adopt key strategic management principles without conscious reference to their organization's value or interest position. This is another form of power exercised in a less obviously recordable fashion.

The analysis presented below also examines the extent to which Hardy's 'fourth dimension' (a significant addition to the original Lukesian model) based around the idea of non-sovereign 'systems power' is evident. If power is indeed 'live' in this dimension, then neither the state or any other actor such as, for example, management consultants or the chief executives of third sector organizations can be identified as consciously promoting or adopting strategic management. Rather, it is suggested that in this type of situation, a 'system' has become dominant and strategic management has come to assume ritualistic status in the third sector. Here there is no deliberate use of power in contrast to the situation in the other three circumstances. However, the interests of particular groups may be served without the conscious use of power. The system itself may create an acceptance of the values, traditions, cultures and structures of an institution or society. Once more researchers are faced with a difficult task in identifying the existence of power in this dimension.

### **The data examined**

The research established that strategic management practices were widespread in the nonprofit sector in Northern Ireland. Table 1 shows that almost three-quarters (73.4%) of organisations had a current strategic plan and a further 18% had one in development. A further 5.5% were considering it for the future. Only 3% of organisations did not have a strategic plan, did not have one in development, or were not considering developing one for the future. In terms of how long the organisations had been involved in strategic planning, 22% had been strategic planning for more than 10 years; 42% had been strategic planning for between 5 and 9 years; and 36% had been strategic planning for less than 5 years. More than three-quarters (78%) of the organisations had therefore been strategic planning for less than 10 years. More than two-thirds of the organisations had a mission statement, a vision statement, a statement of values/principles, long-term aims/goals/objectives, performance indicators/measures of success, and strategies for achieving the aims/goals. Almost half had critical success factors, and just less than a third had multi-year budgets. (Table 2).

**TABLE 1 – NUMBER OF ORGANISATIONS WHICH HAVE A STRATEGIC PLAN, OR ARE DEVELOPING, OR CONSIDERING DEVELOPING ONE**

	Percentage	Number
Has a current strategic plan	73.4%	94
Is developing a strategic plan	18.0%	23
A strategic plan is being considered for future	5.5%	7
Do not have a strategic plan and are not currently developing or considering one	3.1%	4

N=128

**TABLE 2 – CONTENT OF STRATEGIC PLANS**

Percentage	Number	Content of strategic plans
89.4%	103	Mission statement
89%	102	Long-term aims/goals/objectives
85%	98	A statement of values/principles
75.5%	87	A vision statement
73.4%	84	Performance indicators/measures of success
66.5%	76	Strategy(ies) for achieving the aims/goals
49%	56	Critical success factors
32.4%	37	Multi-year budgets

N=115 (13 respondents omitted to answer this part of the questionnaire)

As can be seen from Table 3 below, the most popular strategic analysis processes were: SWOT; identifying strategic issues; visioning; mandate analysis; identifying core competencies/unique selling points; an appraisal of strategic options; a needs/market assessment; stakeholder analysis; and an analysis of external trends. These were all carried out in some way by the majority of organisations. The impression that strategic management has been embraced in a systematic as opposed to piecemeal fashion is further reinforced by data collected on the adoption of implementation tools. The survey contained nine questions, drawn from the literature, that were designed to ascertain the extent that the organisation had in place processes to ensure that any strategic plan would be implemented effectively. More than three-quarters had: an annual financial plan and budget; annual operational plans; indicators of success/performance indicators; and a timetable for the frequent monitoring of the achievement of objectives in the plan.

Table 4 recording analytic processes used, confirms the voluntary sector's closeness to the standard strategic management recipe.

The majority of organisations surveyed currently engaged in a range of strategic analysis, formulation and implementation processes, and had a written strategic plan or were in the process of developing one. The extent and coherence to industry norms evidenced in the pattern of adoption recorded by the census, runs counter to the finding of Stone et al (1999) (based on a review of 21 research studies on strategy in the nonprofit sector) (including Odom & Boxx 1988; Stone 1989; Tober 1991; and Wolch 1990) that many nonprofit organisations did not use strategic planning and tend to rely on a variety of planning methods such as operational planning and annual goal setting, on some elements of long-range planning, and/or informal planning. It appears that over the past 10 years forces have been at work to achieve such a comprehensive pattern of adoption. The concept of strategic planning/management is now a dominant management paradigm amongst medium-sized to large non-profit organisations in Northern Ireland.

**TABLE 3 – RANGE OF STRATEGIC ANALYSIS PROCESSES USED**

Percentage using the process	Percentage using the process in an in-depth formal way	Strategic planning process
79.7%	45.3%	SWOT analysis
78.9%	46.9%	Identified strategic issues
78.2%	43.8%	Visioning
78.1%	49.6%	Mandate Analysis
75%	39.1%	Identified Core Competencies/USPs
61%	26.6%	Appraisal of their strategic position
57%	25.0%	Needs/market assessment
56.3%	26.0%	Stakeholder analysis
54.7%	26.6%	Analysed the external trends
49.2%	16.4%	Analysis of the roles of, and relationships with, other organisations
46.9%	16.4%	Scenario planning
29.7%	10.9%	Product portfolio matrix analysis

N=128

**TABLE 4 – EXTENT OF USE OF STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES**

Percentage organisations	Strategy implementation processes
89.4%	An annual financial plan and budget
86.2%	Annual operational plans
80.8%	Indicators of success/performance indicators
79.8%	A timetable for the frequent monitoring of the achievement of objectives in the plan
73.4%	Detailed action plans
72.3%	A regular review of human resource needs, based on strategic and operational plans
68%	An annual income generation plan
65.9%	A regular review of skill needs

62.8%	A performance management system
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N=128

The next step in the research process was to examine the data with a view to learning more about the motivations driving the adoption of strategic management by voluntary sector executives. The findings of the literature review (Webster & Wylie 1988; Wolch 1990; Feinstein 1985; Stone 1989; Tober 1991; and Stone et al 1999) had suggested that non-profit organisations tended to plan when they were confronting external pressures or threats such as for example, a major drop in funding, or other pressure from funders. The chief executives in the study were asked to indicate which items from a defined list of 11, drawn from the literature, were factors in the decision to engage in strategic planning (They could indicate more than one factor). There were 94 chief executives declaring themselves as having been influenced by one or more factor. The findings are shown in Table 5 below.

**TABLE 5 –FACTORS REPORTED BY CHIEF EXECUTIVES AS HAVING INFLUENCED THEIR ENGAGEMENT IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

Percentage of respondents	Number of respondents	Driver
52.13%	49	Rapid growth
32.98%	31	The appointment of a new chief executive
32.98%	31	Survival under threat
31.91%	30	External evaluation
25.55%	24	Pressure from funders
25.55%	24	Pressure from staff
12.76%	12	Pressure from trustees
8.51%	8	The appointment of a new chair
6.38%	6	The appointment of new trustees
5.32%	5	Pressure from service users
3.19%	3	Pressure from volunteers.

N=94 (number of respondents indicating that one or more factor had influenced their engagement in strategic management)

The most prominent three drivers were *primarily internal* - rapid growth (first – 52%) and appointment of new chief executive (second- 33%), survival threatened (third- 33%). The fourth most salient reason was external (32%). Only 25% of cited

'pressure from funders' as a reason for having adopted strategic management practices. Overt pressure was therefore comparatively less salient than other factors. However, while "first dimension power" (in the form of coercion or persuasion by funders) was not a markedly important driver, the possibility that power was exercised by funders through the "second dimension" should not be dismissed. For example an organisation might have commissioned an external evaluation because it anticipated criticism or sanction from a funder if strategic management processes were found to be absent.

**TABLE 6 – REASONS FOR NOT ENGAGING IN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

Percentage of organisations	Number	Reasons for not engaging in strategic planning/management
57.5%	19	Lack of time/resources to engage in strategic planning/management
48.5%	16	Continual need to fire-fight/deal with immediate crises
36.4%	12	Lack of strategic planning/management skills in the Board
33.3%	11	Lack of strategic planning/management skills amongst the staff
24.2%	8	Doubts about the effectiveness of strategic planning/management
24.2%	8	Lack of commitment/interest from the Board
21.2%	7	Turbulent/uncertain external environment
21.2%	7	Plans are dictated by someone else (e.g. a parent organisation)
18.2%	6	Happy with their current way of planning/management
15.2%	5	At an entrepreneurial stage of development
12.1%	4	Lack of openness to new ideas
9.1%	3	Unresolved conflict in the organization
9.1%	3	Lack of interest or commitment from the staff.
6.1%	2	Very stable external environment
0%	0	Ideological disagreement with use of business techniques in the voluntary sector

N = 34 (the number of respondents declaring non-engagement with strategic management)

The study also found that, in the cases of the smaller number (34) of organisations that had not adopted a strategic management approach, very few chief officers reported any ideological problems with strategic management. As Table 6 records, explanations for non-adoption of strategic management centered mainly on lack of time and/or skills. This further suggests that “first dimension” or “second dimension” power exercised by another actor is not a major contributor to the decision to adopt strategic management. Instead, the evidence suggests that chief executives of voluntary organizations mostly perceive themselves as adopting strategic management through choice in relation to a problem such as growth, the need to take charge on appointment or to deal with a crisis.

The possibility that “third dimension” power is operating however must be considered. The decisions and actions of chief executives are further explained by examining their thinking on the cause-effect benefits of strategic management. In relation to this question it was hoped that the research would enable a clearer understanding of what precisely chief executives considered they would gain from strategic management. Respondents were asked to indicate, on the basis of a defined list of examples drawn from the literature, what form of impact strategic management had made within their organisation. They were permitted to choose up to six from a defined list of 30 items. The findings are shown in Table 7, below.

The percentage (%) figure in Table 7 below, shows the percentage of respondents who indicated that their organisation had experienced a specified impact as a result of engaging in strategic management.

**TABLE 7 – PERCEIVED POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT**

Percentage of organisations	Number	Perceived impact of strategic management
76.6%	72	Created a clearer organisational focus
50%	47	Increased organisational unity
43.6%	41	Improved financial planning
41.5%	39	Improved programming and monitoring of performance
39.4%	37	Increased the quality of services
38.3%	36	Assisted creative thinking
37.2%	35	Improved organisational structure
37.2%	35	Increased the sense of ownership by staff
33%	31	Improved the likelihood of long term survival
33%	31	Made the organisation more business-like
31.9%	30	Increased professionalism
27.7%	26	Increased funding/fund-raising
24.5%	23	Improved efficiency
22.3%	21	Increased staff morale
21.3%	20	Improved human resource planning
21.3%	20	Created greater challenges for staff
20.2%	19	Enabled the organisation to meet more of the need
19.1%	18	Increased range of services
19.1%	18	Helped make difficult decisions
18%	17	Created greater clarity of roles
17%	16	Increased the sense of ownership by trustees
16%	15	Improved the public image
14.9%	14	Increased extent of services
14.9%	14	Resulted in major changes
14.9%	14	Improved governance
12.8%	12	Improved the reputation with decision-makers
7%	7	Made the organisation more bureaucratic
3%	3	Made the organisation less flexible
3%	3	Less able to experiment
1%	1	Resulted in a loss of traditional values

N=94 (number of respondents identifying positive and negative impacts)

As Table 7 indicates, chief executives perceived strategic planning/management had various impacts, of which the most important were: creating a clearer organisational focus (more than three-quarters of respondents); increasing organisational unity (half of respondents). More than a quarter also reported that strategic management had improved financial planning; programming and monitoring of performance; the quality of services; organisational structure; the sense of ownership by the staff; professionalism; funding/fundraising and the likelihood of long-term survival; as well as assisting creative thinking and making the organisation more business-like.

These findings are striking. The motivations of the chief executives were predominantly related to *'control'* over the organization rather than to *'outcomes'*. Outcome indicators - 'meeting more need', 'increasing range of services', 'increasing extent of services', 'major changes' come far down the list. Control indicators - 'organizational focus', 'unity', 'financial planning', 'increasing monitoring and performance', 'quality' and 'make the organization more business like' on the other hand are all in the top ten. Only 'assisted in creative thinking' represents a top ten impact with no 'control' association. It is also noteworthy that very few respondents perceived any negative consequences of strategic planning/management. (See last five options in Table 7)

One possible inference to be drawn from this set of results is that strategic management is seen as a resource for chief executives intent on developing a monopoly over decision making, or at least, enhanced control over their organisation. Such a conclusion would contradict the popular (but faulty as indicated by this research) assumption that the voluntary sector opposes the imposition of strategic management on ideological grounds. The analysis suggests that chief executives of voluntary organisations may be employing concepts and techniques associated with strategic management in order to increase their power and control over the organization, with the implication that this will create or further extend the distance between themselves and other employees and volunteers within the organization. If this is true, chief executives of voluntary organisations would be following a classic 'iron law of oligarchy' path whereby strategic management responsibilities and skills bolster the position of chief executives and other senior managers by facilitating and legitimising their exercise of power, by providing a rationalization of their successes and failures and by conferring them a corporate identity. (Knights and Morgan 1991). If so, then in power terms, chief executives are identifiable as sovereign actors exerting power over other organizational actors. This was not a conclusion predicted from the literature review conducted, which had suggested that power exercised by the state/funder on voluntary sector organization would be important in the adoption of strategic management. The possibility that the significant power relationship is to be found on a different level – within the voluntary sector organizations themselves - has been raised by the preceding analysis. However, the conclusion that strategic management is a power resource for chief executives must be treated cautiously. Power is according to Lukes a contested concept and the results of the Northern Ireland study would seem to confirm this assertion. The research has demonstrated that strategic management practices are now deeply embedded in the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland and are widely used. Although the study found that strategic management is very much a chief executive dominated process, there was insufficient evidence to prove that the perceived advantages of strategic management within third sector organizations accrue solely to the chief executive. Further investigation, best conducted on a longitudinal basis would be required to provide answers to this question. Nor was it clear whether, and if so to what extent, chief executives had internalized the strategic management discourse in the sense of having developed an awareness of the power it gave them. Further work would need to be carried out on issues such as the balance between the degree to which chief executives believed their

employment of strategic management to be beneficial to the organization and their perception of the impact such practices had in legitimizing and strengthening their own power and interests within the organisation. The chief executives may not of course be sovereign actors in the Lukesian sense. In spite of the absence of strong evidence demonstrating that first and second dimension power is being exercised by the state and funders on chief executives, an ideological hegemony over their responses to problems and challenges facing them may well be firmly established. Third dimension ideological power of this type is not directly observable, although an analysis of third sector discourses with the state and funders could be anticipated to reveal interesting results. On the basis of the data collected one may also speculate about whether, and if so in what measure, the dominance of strategic management is a fourth dimension power phenomenon, rather than an instrument of control. The fourth dimension of power, as suggested by Hardy (1994) is based on systemic power. Here power is not exercised by powerful groups or elites, but instead would subsist in the nature, structures and culture of the state/funder- third sector 'system' itself.

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