

Book review

The Logic of Charity: Great Expectations in Hard Times

John Mohan and Beth Breeze
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There has been much discussion about the role of charities and the voluntary sector in the UK, raising important questions about how charities are funded and how they should operate. These debates arise from a number of developments, including (but not limited to) the contracting out of welfare and criminal justice services to voluntary organisations, the Conservative government's 'Big Society' emphasis on neighbourhood-level social action as a replacement for statutory provision, and moves to curtail the ability of charities to campaign or lobby for policy change.

Mohan and Breeze's book 'The Logic of Charity' provides a thorough exploration of key questions about the role of charities, including where charitable effort is situated in the UK, how it is funded and who benefits. The authors draw upon and synthesise a number of different studies, providing valuable empirical data to underpin their detailed analysis. As such, their book offers a comprehensive evidence base that should be valuable to those engaged in debates about the charitable sector. The authors clearly target the book at politicians and policymakers, indicating that they hope to tackle some of the 'misunderstandings and misconceptions of charitable activity' (p.2) held by this group as well as the wider public. Mohan and Breeze argue that politicians who seek to encourage charity, or 'harness it in support of their political programmes' (p.3) do not understand very well the logic guiding charitable action, and in particular donors' decision-making and the distribution of resources. The data analysis in the book is detailed and, while not always an easy read, it provides a valuable summary of key data and an overview of issues for anyone with an interest in the state of the UK charitable sector.

The authors' central question throughout the book is whether or not there is a discernible logic to the concept of charity:

Whilst the state is driven by the logic of politics and the demands of voters, and business is driven by the market and the demands of consumers, what - if anything - is the equivalent logic and driving force behind the charity sector? (p.2)

Although their conclusions to this question are not entirely clear, the book does deftly draw out the implications of the available empirical data to illuminate issues such as the distribution of charitable resources, the relationship between supply and demand in relation to philanthropic donations, and the role of fundraising intermediaries.

The book opens with a historical overview of the UK's charitable sector and acknowledges the contested understandings of what charity is, and of public opinions towards it. Mohan and Breeze cite evidence by Glennie and Whillans-Welldrake (2014) that two-thirds of people view the role of charities as 'highly important' and some 70% of adults in the UK donate to charity (CAF 2015). Despite this there is a general lack of understanding of the role of charities and the origins and resources of services and facilities used by the public (p.6). The first chapter contains a useful and detailed overview of the number of charities in the UK, their levels of income and their charitable purposes. It sets the scene for the following chapters, providing the context to questions about composition of income sources and how donors choose which organisations to donate to.

Chapter 2 investigates the distribution of charitable income by type of charitable cause, and explores how reliant charities are upon giving by private donors. The authors' analysis demonstrates that charities do not rely on philanthropic gifts, with a significant proportion of their income coming from either fees paid by individuals for services received, or from government payments for service delivery. Given the heterogeneity of charitable organisations, they argue that it is more meaningful to assess the sector's income by charitable cause rather than by aggregate figures representing the sector's income from different sources, and provide several tables to this effect.

Chapter 3 considers the geographical distribution of charitable resources and examines the question of whether 'charity deserts' exist in the UK. A combination of data sources is used to demonstrate that the distribution of charity activity and resources is indeed uneven. The authors show that fewer charities are situated in poorer neighbourhoods than rich ones, and that those in more deprived areas are likely to be more dependent on statutory income than voluntary income (making them more vulnerable to austerity measures). Interestingly, given the Conservative government's focus on the potential of smaller, community-based organisations to take on public service delivery, Mohan and Breeze assess the spread of charities working at neighbourhood level. They observe that these smaller, neighbourhood charities are around twice as likely to be found in the most prosperous areas compared to the most disadvantaged locations, and suggest that many such small organisations will be unable or unwilling to take on public service delivery as a result of their restrictive legal form.

While Chapters 2 and 3 present extensive quantitative material, Chapters 4 and 5 move into a discussion of qualitative material, drawing on studies examining the decisions of philanthropic donors. For me, this was the most accessible and interesting section of the book, offering interview fragments and insights into the motivations of individual donors. Breeze and Mohan use this empirical evidence to demonstrate that philanthropy is supply-led rather than demand-led. In other words, donations by philanthropists are driven largely by a donor's preferences and identification with a cause, and not necessarily by levels of need. As such, the authors argue that patterns of private giving and social need will not necessarily be aligned. Furthermore, they conclude that 'private giving occurs without reference to any governmental agenda and cannot be easily "turned up" or redirected by policy levers' (p.87). The focus of Chapter 5 is the role played by 'intermediaries' such as professional fundraisers and philanthropy advisors. Again, the authors synthesise findings from several studies,

drawing on survey, interview and case study data. This evidence suggests that philanthropy is unlikely to serve to 'plug gaps' in public spending. They show that donors are motivated by personal reasons and encouraged by intermediaries seeking to make the experience of donating an enriching one, rather than being driven by a desire to address gaps in existing provision.

In their concluding chapter, Mohan and Breeze tease out some of the implications of their analysis for current debates. They highlight the significant disparities in the distribution of charities in the most prosperous and the most disadvantaged geographical areas, but caution against the assumption that these are the result of a lack of voluntary effort in poorer communities, but rather due to a lack of resources and time. Secondly, they conclude that attempts by policymakers to 'nudge' the balance towards more philanthropic giving as a replacement for statutory funding will not necessarily be successful. They argue that private giving is primarily driven by personal motivations rather than utilitarian prioritisation of need.

Given the pace of policy change, it remains to be seen how current the book remains and how soon a second edition may be warranted. At present, it makes an important contribution to the evidence base for those engaged in debates about the role of the sector and offers a useful resource for anyone seeking solid facts and figures about the distribution of charitable giving and activity in the UK. It also highlights and challenges myths about charity, for example by revealing that it is sometimes the better-off that benefit more than the poorer sections of society, and that charitable giving does not always align with social need.

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References

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