

The AGI Foresight Study - The UK Geospatial Industry in 2015

An Expert Paper



Third Sector and geographical information

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Scope

According to Office of the Third Sector (which is a unit within the Cabinet Office), the Third Sector is defined as the part of the economy where organisations are non-governmental, value-driven, and use financial surpluses to invest in social, environmental or cultural aims. It includes a wide range of organisational structures, including voluntary organisation, charities, co-operatives, mutual societies and social enterprises. As in the private sector, there is a wide range of organisations from the very small (such as a community organisation that manages local allotments) to the very big – such as the co-operative bank or Oxfam. This is a significant sector – it includes over 870,000 organisations, with a total income in 2006/7 of £116 billion, and assets of £210 billion, employing the equivalent of 464,000 people. The sector is based on mixed sources of funding that is a combination of grants, donations and commercial or commercial-like activities.

The analysis below provides a brief review of the current situation and suggests drivers for change in terms of geographical information use over the coming five years.

Current situation

The use of GIS by organisations in the Third Sector has a long history, especially in the environmental part of the Third Sector, likely because of the intensive use of GIS in environmental science in general and the involvement of scientists in such organisations. For example, ESRI conservation programme (<http://www.conservationgis.org/index.html>) has been running since 1989 and provides software, hardware and data to environmental Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). In the UK, ESRI (UK) donated a copy of Arc/Info to Friends of the Earth (FOE) in the early 1990s, and the organisation used it to develop one of the early demonstrators for web-based GIS, as well as for spatial analysis in support of various FOE campaigns.

However, even within environmental NGOs, the use of GIS relies on the initiative of individuals. For example, at FOE once the individuals that created the GIS left towards the end of the 1990s, the use of GIS declined. Only in few organisations there is enough awareness to the applicability of GIS to create a more sustainable GIS unit. For example, Groundwork is a federation of local organisations across the UK that focuses on range of environmental projects. Today, the national organisation is running its own GIS unit (<http://www.groundwork-gis.org.uk/>) which provides services to the federation.

The Third Sector, of course, extends to many other areas including health, aid organisations and social services. The familiarity with spatial analysis and geographical information across the sector as a whole

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is limited, and similarly to public and private sector organisations in the 1990s, the development of GIS capabilities is many times depends on local champion, and when that specific person moves on, the organisation finds it hard to maintain the system.

Most of the sector is characterised by small organisations that are operating on a very tight budget and are concerned with the delivery of the service or activity for which they were created. The staff turnover and the budget limitations present real difficulties when it comes to implementing a system for which the return period is long, such as GIS. Until recently, the cost of the software and access to data were also serious deterrents for the use of GIS. Although the Ordnance Survey (OS) provide a clear declaration for their willingness to provide data to the Third Sector, this is only under the condition that the organisation is delivering a project under a contract with public sector body which is included in the existing agreements (PGA and MSA) with the OS (see <http://www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/oswebsite/business/sectors/government/third-sector/>). The problem is that not all Third Sector organisations are working under such contracts, and the development of a GIS for the specific period of the contract can complicate matters.

Anticipated changes in Third Sector use of GI

The need to deliver public services locally at lower costs and in a more effective way has already turned the attention of central government to the Third Sector. There seem to be an agreement across the political spectrum that the Third Sector will have a growing role in delivering public services in the future.

There are many problems with the current trend of promoting the use of the Third Sector for public service delivery, not least because universality of delivery is not guaranteed, many organisations are idiosyncratic in their approach to service delivery, and the use of resources is far from optimal. However as all political parties are keen to use the Third Sector for this purpose, so the office for the Third Sector is likely to increase its importance in the near future. This can be viewed as the government 'crowd sourcing' public service delivery.

From the geospatial sector perspective the Third Sector will benefit from the changes in technology and the limited ability of such organisations to dedicate resources to GI mean that they are likely to use web-based solutions, and/or free and open source software and data sets to try and minimise costs. There are already examples of Housing Associations (some of them operate as social enterprises and follow the ethos of the sector) choosing to use open source databases to run their applications, and potentially using databases such as PostGIS to store their geographical information. The limited resources also mean that they are open to use free and open source desktop GIS.

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Because they are likely to interact closely with the traditional public sector organisations, we can expect that innovations and new practices that are used in the sector will influence traditional organisation too. This is an issue that can create challenges to public sector software vendors and data providers.

Another issue that will increase the need of the Third Sector to use geographical information is the expectation of public sector bodies to measure the impact of the services that are being delivered. Many of the grants that are being given to the Third Sector are tied with demand for detailed evaluation of the outcomes from the activity. However, as the issues that are being faced are challenging and complex, evaluation of such activities and how the money was used is notoriously difficult. Here mapping and spatial analysis of the population that received support can be a very effective way to present impact. There are some early examples for this, such as the work that UCL has done with the charity UnLtd, which supports social-entrepreneurs. Web tools such as GeoCommons may be useful for this purpose, too. Datasets such as Output Area Classification (OAC) may also be important, as the cost of commercial geodemographic datasets is beyond the reach of many Third Sector organisations, although some of them might already have access to these datasets and use them in planning fundraising activities.

In summary, it is expected that the Third Sector will experience a growth in the use of GI and geographical information technologies over the next 5 years, although in terms of the type of activities and patterns of data and software use, they are very different to the current clients that many in the GI sector are familiar with.

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