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# Why charities are best equipped to take a longer view of service delivery

Respecting the slower nature of charities is part of the process of understanding them, says consultant Tom Levitt

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Tom Levitt

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Tom Levitt argues that the slower, evolutionary momentum of the voluntary sector distinguishes it from the fast-paced, "quick buck" attitude of the private sector. Photograph: Gk Hart/vikki Hart/Getty Images

Slow food is good. Combining nutritious, locally sourced, fresh ingredients with the preservation of cooking skills and companionship, it's authentic and sustainable. Slow charities, as [Charity Commission](#) chairwoman Suzi Leather told a working breakfast of sector leaders a couple of weeks ago, should be the service delivery equivalent of slow cooking. Authoritative words from a former deputy chair of the [Food Standards Agency](#), but do they bear scrutiny?

Amid the rush of the 21st century and ever more clinical definitions of what success actually means, charities are perhaps among the best equipped organisations to take the long view, to see their work in perspective and to align it carefully to complement that of other sectors. The term "slow charity" chimes with the enlightened capitalist concept of "patient capital", money which is prepared to wait a long time for a return on its

investment.

Slow charity describes an outlook, not an ambition. It is a process which thinks and plans before it leaps; it is not an excuse for amateurism. It is a feature which distinguishes the third sector from the public sector, often hamstrung by the demands of electoral cycles, and the private sector's headlong rush for the "quick buck" – which is at the heart of accusations of irresponsibly predatory behaviour levelled against business in recent weeks. Perhaps that is the fast food approach, maximising calorific intake while running the risk of metaphorical heart attacks, diabetes and obesity.

Evolution is also slow among charities: of Britain's 50 biggest charities in 1985, 28 were still in the top fifty in 2010 and 45 were still in the top 350. Of the 50 largest UK companies at that time only 15 were still in the top fifty 25 years later while many, unlike the charities, had closed down or merged beyond recognition.

Distinguishing bodies with a charitable outlook from those with statutory or market-driven responsibilities in this way is not to demean them or drive a wedge between the sectors: now more than ever the skills, resources and energy of all three sectors need to come together in the best interests of society, and of the most vulnerable in particular. Respecting the slow nature of charities, some of which existed long before modern local government was born, is part of understanding them and making cross-sector partnerships possible.

So momentum ranks alongside the approach to risk as a way of distinguishing between sectors. The private sector sees risk as an essential part of daily life; the public sector doesn't like to gamble so doesn't take risks as an entrepreneur might, while charities (not least some charitable foundations) are the most risk averse. Understand how a prospective working partner regards risk and the pace at which it is happy to move forward and you are a long way to achieving the synergy that cross-sector partnerships require without needing to adopt all of the other's values.

Of course this is a simplification: a disaster relief charity cannot waste days when lives are at stake and even slow charities can be innovators. Equally there is a small but growing minority of institutional investors who are prepared to be patient – even to accept a lower rate of eventual return on their investments if a positive social change can be elicited on the way.

Whilst the tortoise might not always beat the hare, the image that each species generates sticks with them for life.

*Tom Levitt is a freelance consultant on cross-sector partnerships. He established Sector 4 Focus in 2010 to specialise in bringing together businesses and charities. He was Labour MP for High Peak from 1997 to 2010*

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