

"You Feel You Hit a Wall and Then You Have No Choice but to Form an Association": Characteristics of Grassroots Organisations Providing Welfare Services in Civil Society

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During the last two decades, civil society around the world as well as in Israel has become an important arena for the provision of social services to excluded and marginalised populations. In light of the retrenchment of the welfare state and the growing needs of different populations who have relied on state services in the past, civil society has become an alternative arena in which social services are initiated and provided, and claims for policy changes are raised, articulated and mobilised. Grassroots organisations, which are the focus of this article, are defined as 'locally based, significantly autonomous, volunteer-run, formal nonprofit groups that manifest substantial voluntary altruism as groups and use the associational form of organisation'. They have official memberships of volunteers who perform most of the activity done in and by these nonprofits. These organisations are unconnected to state institutions in any long-term or substantial manner. Thus they are entirely different from non-profits that supply services for government by contracting in welfare states. In many welfare states, grassroots organisations become a massive provider of social services to such excluded populations as children, women and, people with disabilities. Despite their growth in size, variety and importance as social actors, providing social services and advocating changes in social policy, they have not received much scholarly attention and have seldom been studied as a distinctive group.

This article presents a study which focuses on grassroots organisations operating in the field of social services in Israel. The study aims to analyse the activities of these organisations systematically and in depth, and to provide comprehensive data

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about the unique characteristics and dynamic relations between them and welfare state institutions and about the implications of this phenomenon for the welfare state and civil society. Facets of the organisations' activity examined are: (1) the organisational aspect; (2) services provided; (3) client populations, and (4) relations with the welfare state. Using a qualitative research method, the study examines the services and operating modes of 44 organisations in the field of welfare services serving three different target groups: women, children and people with disabilities.

The findings relate to several themes: Characteristics of the grassroots organisations and their clients, the importance of the communities they serve, the holistic and sporadic nature of the social services they offer, and their loose, yet tense relations with institutions of the welfare state. The research findings shed light on a significant aspect of civil society organisations active in the field of social services in Israel, which serve many citizens from excluded populations. The findings highlight the strengths and limitations of grassroots organisations' activities and the challenges they present to the welfare state.