

Practicing what they preach?

The MakePovertyHistory event on 2nd July saw 225,000 people protest peacefully around Edinburgh. But while it was deemed a triumph for the campaign as a whole, was it such a success for all the individual coalition members? Becky Slack finds out

Walking around the Meadows site in Edinburgh, participants of the largest protest ever to take place in Scotland were greeted by a sea of white t-shirts and smiling faces, all vying for their part in making poverty history. On the main stage, celebrities including actor Pete Postlewaite, television presenter Jonathan Dimbleby, comedian Eddie Izzard and pop group Texas joined representatives from CAFOD, Christian Aid and Tearfund in rallying the crowd and raising the atmosphere.

In the "Contempl8ion Zone" religious groups joined forces to debate the issues. In the "Gener8ion Zone" an "unfair football" match was used to entertain teenagers while teaching them about free trade, and in the "Campaign Zone" 80 coalition organisations used interactive games to raise awareness of their own individual work and how it contributed to making poverty history. Meanwhile, a human white band was slowly forming around the city.

Logistically, this event took a massive effort from all those involved to ensure it ran smoothly. Over the past nine months, Alex Burrow, the only paid member of the organising team, had had regular

meetings with the Edinburgh-based EPOG (Events Planning Operational Group), which comprised representatives from the local council, emergency services and transport companies among others, to ensure that everyone was happy with the plans – ironing out issues such as potential gridlock, waste management, emergency access, and parking for the expected 900 coaches. In addition, teams made up of volunteers from the various coalition organisations sorted out the speakers, bands, equipment, zones, food and toilet facilities.

"It was thanks to the hard work of everybody involved that we were able to deliver all those really complicated moments, which may have seemed simple but were actually harder than you might think," said Burrow. "We had live feeds to the Live8 concert in London to think about, plus everything else that comes with organising an event that was expected to have anywhere between 100,000 – 200,000 people attending."

On the surface this did look and feel like a well-organised event that was clearly and effectively projecting its message. Individuals of all ages and from all walks of life were peacefully making

their feelings known – no mean feat considering predictions that the event could have been hijacked by thousands of violent protestors. But underneath the unified exterior there were rumblings of dissent.

Squeezed into a small corner of the Contempl8ion Zone, Ivor Greer was handing out leaflets about his charity, Sao, a small Christian mission that works solely with Cambodian people. While he was generally happy with how the event was proceeding, he commented on how difficult it was for his organisation to stand out among the bigger named charities. "But then they have the resources that we don't have," he said. "I share an office with another charity which is also a member of the coalition. It didn't come because it felt that the big players were getting all the publicity."

It was easy to see why it had that impression. In the weeks leading up to the event the larger charities had dominated the press, and when looking at the media page on the website the main list of contacts comprised mainly of the big name charities, including Action Aid, Cafod, Oxfam and Christian Aid. On the day, stalls, banners and placards from larger organisations were all clearly visible, and while it is fair to argue this was because they had more supporters to bring along to the demonstration, this imbalance was again reflected on the website – this time in a blog, which at time of press only represented the views of the larger organisations.

Given that this was such a large coalition with more than 500 aid agencies, faith groups, unions and other bodies, it is perhaps unsurprising that there has been a tendency to focus on the views of just a few individual organisations. Most would



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accept that when working with so many different people it can be difficult, if not impossible, to please everyone all of the time. And to some extent, the system used to enable organisations to highlight their own causes at the event was as fair it could be: all members could apply to bring stalls and games and, according to Burrow, all those that did were successful.

Yet, as a spokesperson from Riders for Health said: "Limited resources meant we were unable to do this. It would be good to try and work out a way of getting smaller charities more involved because it's always the same big names which are able to take advantage of MPH as they have the capacity to do so."

One way to do this would be for the larger organisations to share some of their resources. This isn't a new idea. Working as part of a coalition is about exactly that – joining forces and combining finances, resources, and/or voices either to give a campaign more power and influence or to improve service delivery. The Charity Commission has often vocalised its support for this, as has the NCVO, both of which say that it can be a great way to learn and to grow. Yet, in the NCVO's February 2005 report, *1 + 1 = 3: Does Size Really Matter*, which studied partnerships between large and small organisations, the umbrella body established that although some good examples of best practice were uncovered, "what seems to be generally missing is the conscious and upfront acknowledgement of the fact that size really does matter".

And in the MPH coalition there is a striking difference between the size of the major players and some of the smaller coalition members. In the RCM *Top 3000 Charities 2005/2006*, Oxfam, Save the Children and ActionAid, with annual incomes of £186m, £124m and £81m respectively, all make it into the top 50. This is in comparison to the smaller members such as Harvest Help which, with an annual income of just over £880,000, doesn't even make it into the Top 3,000. With such massive variations in income, perhaps it's only fair to expect the larger organisations to share some of



their wealth.

However, in their defence Burrow reckons that without the larger organisations the event wouldn't have been so successful. "How much do you hold people's hands?" he says. "If you turn it around and look at it the other way, the organisations with the big resources kind of made everything possible." And as Tim Peat, campaigns officer for War on Want and a member of the MPH logistics team, points out, there were some very small organisations who managed to have quite a large presence on the day. "SPEAK, the Christian campaigning organisation, is mainly run by volunteers but brought a massive marquee with it; War on Want is also a relatively small organisation with just 14 staff but what we showed was that if you put in a lot of effort you can reap massive rewards," he said.

Perhaps the answer lies in how the coalition sets out its processes. The NCVO report highlighted how for large/small partnerships to be effective, issues such as how movements are to be communicated, whether there is a hierarchy, who is to provide what to achieve the aims, how the partnership will actually work in practice etc, must



all be ironed out right at the very beginning – and this appears to be something the MPH coalition failed to do, according to Harvest Help's UK programme manager, Kevin Lawrence. "There was a sense that the event was largely wrapped up by the larger charities and input from the smaller ones wasn't easy," he said. "With hindsight it would have been nice to have a collective agreement about how we operated and promoted both MPH and our own individual causes. I don't think it affected the campaign but it left smaller charities with a somewhat sour taste."

As an awareness raising event, the MPH demonstration on 2nd July was undoubtedly a success. Coverage on BBC News 24, ITN, Sky and BBC Radio Five Live combined with the impact of the Live8 gigs took the coalition's message to an audience far wider than the typical charity campaigner. But for the smaller charities involved, participation wasn't as easy or as fruitful as they might have wished. As is so often complained about by the sector, the big get bigger and the small stay small, and a greater willingness to share resources is only one way in which this can be resolved.

To some this sounds uncannily similar to the demands the MPH coalition is making of the G8 members – to share their wealth with the poorest nations to lift them out of poverty. With further white band days coming up to coincide with the UN Summit in September and the WTO meeting in December, more events are in the pipeline. We shall have to wait and see if the larger MPH organisations practice what they preach and satisfy the smaller charities wishes by pooling more of their resources.