

# POVERTY AND THE BIG SOCIETY: VIEWS FROM THE COMMUNITY SECTOR

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The purpose of this e-pamphlet is to stimulate debate within the voluntary and community sector about the 'Big Society' and its potential for delivering greater social justice and reducing poverty. It is made up of six contributions which emerged from a roundtable discussion with some 16 organisations, organised by NPI in November 2011, with various community groups and grant-making charities. The authors and their organisations are:

- Graham Fisher, Toynbee Hall
- Jacqui Roberts, Shoreditch Trust
- Martin Halton, Seedley & Langworthy Trust
- Neil Johnston, Paddington Development Trust
- Mike Houston, Bethnal Green Mission Church
- Vaughan Jones, Praxis

The authors details and a full list of participants in the discussion is provided at the end of this pamphlet.

The discussion was prompted by the belief that while it is possible to pick out the Government's desired outcomes for the Big Society, these outcomes may not be those of many community organisations. By getting stakeholders (especially those experiencing poverty and disadvantage) to clarify what they would see as success, the concept of the Big Society could be given a practical focus and made to serve the interests of those that are disadvantaged.

The six contributions express a range of views, ranging from building the principles behind the Big Society to arguing that that 'Big Society' becomes in practical terms, 'Big Government'. These voices are rarely heard and are crucial to this particular discussion. This introduction paper summarises the context of our discussion and then sets out some ideas on how the discussion might be taken forward.

## THE CONTEXT

The Prime Minister has described the Big Society project as his 'mission in politics' and has pledged 'to fight for it every day, because the Big Society is here to stay.'<sup>1</sup> But as the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) warns 'The Big Society project is hampered by the lack of a clear implementation plan, leading to public confusion about the policy agenda.' The Committee complain that: 'Ministers have not set out clearly what success means for the Big Society project'.<sup>2</sup>

Civil Exchange together with Democratic Audit and DHA are doing a baseline assessment of the 'Big Society'. They are carrying out an audit of how far three government goals of the Big Society are being achieved. The goals are:

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<sup>1</sup> 'PM sets out commitment to Big Society', Number 10 website, 14 February 2011, [www.number10.gov.uk](http://www.number10.gov.uk)

<sup>2</sup> *The Big Society*, 17<sup>th</sup> Report of Session 2010-11, 7/12/2011, p53.

- Community empowerment
- Social action
- Opening up public services

Their report, which should be published soon, will provide a useful baseline and our discussion can feed into the consultation process of this exercise.

But these three government goals are not necessarily the goals for Big Society held by local community groups. In our discussion the community goals raised were around enhanced democracy, with the re-emergence of democratic control over institutions both of government and the market; building on the strengths of current community-driven, collective action; promoting civil liberties, social justice and citizens' rights and finally reducing poverty and inequality.

Neither do the three government objectives clarify who are the beneficiaries of the Big Society and what difference it will make to them. It is possible, for example, to open up public services to different providers and at the same time reduce access for disadvantaged groups (e.g. handing over a public swimming pool to a private leisure club). It is also possible to increase social action by mandating the unemployed into work experience in the voluntary sector with the threat that they will lose their benefits if they refuse the placement. This is very unlikely to be positive either for the voluntary organisation or for the individual.

The three objectives therefore need to be underpinned by some more fundamental outcomes and these remain unspecified. Given the goals that were emerging in our discussion, the outcomes are around those in poverty having a demonstrable voice in decision making, in order that they can increase social justice and reduce poverty and inequality.

The PASC has called for the Government to publish a clear statement, with practical examples, of what the Big Society project is intended to achieve. The Committee suggest that Government should then develop the capacity to collect appropriate data on public service provision through the Big Society project and release it in open, accessible and meaningful formats, to allow the public to assess and judge success. This would be helpful but local community groups still need to consider what they want the Big Society project to achieve and how they are going to hold decision makers to account on their objectives. This e-pamphlet aims to galvanise the community sector to engage in that debate rather than let the outcomes be set by the market or the government.

## THE KEY POINTS

The papers that follow speak for themselves but some of the points they make, and were reinforced by the other organisations at the original discussion meeting, are as follows.

1. As SALT and others argue, the principles behind devolution to community groups are not new and the general principles of community engagement and collective action are widely supported. The government needs to listen to existing community groups and learn and build from their experience. Building community capacity takes time and resources. It also depends on decision makers changing their policies to ensure better quality support for disadvantaged groups rather than seeking to co-op such groups to support an agenda that has been defined by those in power. So it starts by listening rather than starting with a government objective of a smaller state and opening up public service. It requires a focus on building relationships of trust and solidarity. All this can be easily undermined by a commissioning and contract culture with a focus on competitiveness and cost cutting.

2. Many felt that the concept and brand of the Big Society is irretrievably damaged as it has emerged at a time of public expenditure cuts which have dominated the scope for action. It was also felt that actions justified under the Big Society brand were divisive (see point 4 and 5 below), were reducing volunteering, and were increasing inequality. However there was a general feeling, as Toynbee Hall argues, that we should focus on making the most of the opportunities rather than on the terminology.
3. Praxis and others felt that the Big Society was really 'Big Government' with the voluntary sector increasingly tempted by and often cajoled toward the market place and away from its traditional sphere as part of the policy of opening up public services. The trend of pushing the voluntary sector into a mainstream service provider has been pursued by governments for several decades. Yet many in the sector would argue that this reduces its ability to identify gaps, innovate, meet evolving and specialised needs and lobby from the grass roots.
4. Some participants believed a gulf was opening up between the large charities and the small voluntary community groups who could not easily tender for contracts. In our discussion, examples were given about an adventure playground which had been run for 20 years by the local community but had now lost its funding to a larger voluntary contractor and of voluntary groups which no longer had the resources to support volunteering. There was also an example of a Work Programme prime contractor trying to mandate clients into small voluntary groups, making a mockery of the concept of volunteering and providing no financial support. The suggestion was made that more discussion was required between the large voluntary sector infrastructure organisations and small voluntary groups to address this issue.
5. Our discussion also suggested that narrow concepts of "community" and "local" are leading to a refusal to place 'community organisers' with homeless and refugee groups and are therefore exclusionary when placed in the context of new migration. Similarly, the Government is actually deciding who should be counted as part of the Big Society by defining the 'deserving' poor who should receive state support. It was also denigrating the role of those institutions, like trade unions and legal aid, that underpinned free association and civil society but are not seen as part of Big Society. Those at the discussion were clear that the relationships that can truly bring about sustainable social action involve free association within place and interest group and are not those driven by central or local government.
6. Paddington Development Trust (PDT) suggests that Big Society is strongly associated with a political aspiration to empower 'small' societies through the transference of governance powers and fiscal responsibility to 'sub-governing' citizens. The concept raises fundamental questions about how the various sectors of civil society can regain their position as the creator and defender of democracy. PDT argues that a clear indication of the well-being of any society can be measured by the number of electors registered and voting and the numbers participating in civil democracy and crucially, self-governance. They argue for collaborative governance through local government actively empowering its fellow electoral citizens, enabling communities to generate their own civil transformation.
7. Praxis believes that the concept of the 'Big Society' is both seductive and dangerous and that the government's promises of a shift away from public services to a fusion of charity and private sector, is really a cover for a shift to the private sector and a reduction in democracy. Civil society needs to ensure both government and markets remain accountable.

8. There was a consensus that the focus should be on civil society itself and how it can strengthen itself to further democracy, equality and social justice rather than be the victim of the market and passive instruments of government. The Shoreditch Trust argues for partnership and network coordination to respond in a meaningful way to the opportunities and challenges. There was recognition, emphasised in the contribution from Toynbee Hall, that this required resources which are difficult to mobilise when organisations are dealing with public spending cuts. There was a call for voluntary and community sector organisations to be supported to share successful engagement strategies and learning outcomes from neighbourhoods across the country.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

Civil society needs to use the focus on the voluntary and community sector that is contained in the term Big Society for its own purposes and define its preferred relationship between the state, the market and civil society and what it wants to achieve in terms of democracy, social justice and poverty and inequality reduction. Several people felt further conversations should be supported linking small civil society with the big voluntary groups delivering services and those who held resources.

It was also suggested that pointers on how to build civil society and how not to do it could be useful, particularly identifying what both central and local government is currently doing that is reducing the power of civil society and identifying alternative strategies.

NPI remains committed to taking this work forward with local community groups. More conversations are required before there can be a greater consensus on what civil society wants to achieve in relation to poverty and social inclusion/justice and before an amended form of Big Society or alternative concepts like civil society, social justice and social cohesion can be given a practical focus and made to serve the interests of those that are disadvantaged.

## GRAHAM FISHER, TOYNBEE HALL, ALDGATE, EAST LONDON

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***The Big Society 'brand' is damaged but strengthening localism, improving public service delivery and increasing social action remain hugely important. Local people, civil society and local government are better placed to lead this than national government and should explore ways of sharing knowledge and learning.***

Many have highlighted that the lack of any coherent vision and programme of delivery for the Big Society has resulted in the concept and brand being irretrievably damaged. I am less concerned about whether it is too late to salvage the brand than how the more important sentiments behind Big Society can be given life.

Although the lack of Big Society leadership has played a part in its downfall it is important to recognise that civil society itself is undergoing a massive re-alignment as we respond to significant reductions in state expenditure on services. We, including ourselves here at Toynbee Hall, have not therefore been well-placed to define and advocate our own vision of a Big Society. Most of us have been focussed on internal restructuring, redundancy, re-engineering of a business model or the desperate search for earned income. This has made innovation more difficult and sector collaboration less achievable. I don't think I have had more than a couple of conversations about what 'Big Society' means for us here in the last 18 months. That's just a fact, there is no point in beating ourselves up about it but it doesn't mean we can't now change it.

Local government partners and other public agencies have also been looking inward, finding ways to balance budgets rather than trying to work out what a rather vague set of Government policy proposals might mean for local communities and the way public sector business is done. The timing for Big Society was just wrong. But there are signs that we are now getting to some clearer water. More cuts are likely to be on the way but the immediate and all-consuming 'crisis' feels like it is past.

So perhaps it is now the right time to start to think about the sentiments behind the Big Society. The brand probably does need to be ditched. But strengthening localism, improving and reforming public service delivery and increasing social action are hugely important principles that we need to hold on. More importantly, they need more 'bite', stronger leadership and a huge injection of energy to bring about effective change. I am not sure national government can really do that though. Local people, civil society and local government are much better placed to do this.

The relationships that can bring about sustainable social action in a community are local ones. The knowledge and experience of local problems and the most workable solutions and service delivery models to respond to them can often be found local people's hearts and minds. They need to find their voice; structures need to be built around them. Information needs to be shared; a local narrative about jobs, wellbeing, community safety, housing, volunteering needs to be stimulated. New local models need to be identified and tested.

I am particularly keen to see how this can be e-enabled, building digital networks to share knowledge and facilitate communication and action that seem much less prevalent in neighbourhoods like ours here in Aldgate. This is something some communities and neighbourhoods seem very good at and the third sector to be rather weaker at. A potential win-win for all if we can do that better.

I am left with a nagging worry though. None of this will be neat, it certainly won't be uniform and it won't be easy to measure. Is Government and performance management really ready to enable that to happen?

## JACQUI ROBERTS, SHOREDITCH TRUST, EAST LONDON

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***There is clear alignment between the Trust's programmes and Big Society principles. Voluntary and community sector organisations should be supported to share successful engagement strategies and learning outcomes from neighbourhoods across the country to respond in a meaningful way to the opportunities presented by the current agenda.***

Shoreditch Trust is a multi-purpose charitable organisation formed in 2000 working to address the causes of disadvantage in the most deprived areas of Shoreditch, Hackney. The Trust retains a particular focus on supporting and empowering the communities of Shoreditch, but also works collaboratively with a wide network of partner organisations locally, nationally and internationally, helping to address social exclusion in areas also characterised by significant disadvantage. By focussing on the root causes of inequality we aim to help individuals, families and communities improve their mental, physical and social wellbeing, enabling citizens to take responsibility for themselves, in their own spaces.

Shoreditch Trust has over twelve years' experience in supporting and working with communities to improve their neighbourhoods, make their voices heard and build strong local partnerships to produce social, economic and environmental benefits. The Trust's suite of Community Wellbeing programmes are designed and delivered to identify and respond to local issues in a sensitive and responsible way. There is clear alignment with the core principles of Big Society.

Shoreditch Trust, alongside voluntary and community partners sector operates in a fast changing sector. The opportunities for the sector to apply its often long term, and hard won, experience, trust and partnerships around delivery of services, plugging gaps in state provision and deregulation are vast but understandably treated with caution against a backdrop of increasingly scarce resources and shifting policy announcements.

There remain questions around the practicalities, governance and legislative framework of the effort to rebalance the relationship between the society and the state and the methods by which the voluntary sector might facilitate this process.

Shoreditch Trust believes that working in partnership is key to successful initiatives that support local aspirations – from social enterprise models through to street parties. Open channels of communications and meaningful consultation, from grassroots upwards, are the foundations for strong partnerships. This equally applies to Tenant and Resident Associations, Voluntary Sector consortia, Corporate Responsibility entities and Customer-driven operations. Best practice implementation of this process facilitates a level of trust around commissioning and future distribution of contracts, employment opportunities and potential investment.

Voluntary and community sector organisations should be supported to share successful engagement strategies and learning outcomes from neighbourhoods across the country. What are the instruments of change, how do they operate in different settings, what resources are required to make these interventions viable and how are they evaluated? This preparation is, of course, already happening in some areas but requires further network co-ordination to respond in a meaningful way to the opportunities and challenges that the Localism Bill, and wider Big Society strategies, will present in the coming months.

## MARTIN HALTON, SEEDLEY & LANGWORTHY TRUST, SALFORD

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***To retrieve something meaningful and tangible from the Big Society, government needs to listen to, and acknowledge, what's been working effectively in communities so that it works with, rather than against, much of the good practice within the sector.***

The general concept and principle of Big Society (smaller state, greater devolved responsibility for local authorities and communities) is not a particularly new one.

Look across the country and you'll see numerous examples of this in practice over the last 10 to 15 years, through various regeneration programmes such as the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), New Deal for Communities (NDC) and other community-driven/social action projects.

At local level, you'll also see programmes such as participating budgeting and devolved budgets for community projects through Community Committees that have given citizens greater opportunity to influence how public services can be developed at local levels.

Whilst it could be argued that some of the above programmes have reinforced the traditional, hierarchical, 'top-down' approach to regeneration and public service delivery, the more successful and effective ones have tended to be those that have placed meaningful priority, emphasis and resources on the importance of building social capital amongst communities.

The successful regeneration of the Seedley and Langworthy area has taken place due to an ongoing programme of physical and social regeneration (through the SRB 5 programme). The Seedley & Langworthy Trust (SALT) has worked effectively with a range of partners over the last 12 years to deliver the priorities of the SRB programme, in particular the social programme.

This has resulted in SALT facilitating a range of community engagement and development programmes and activities through working closely with individuals, community groups and residents associations (of which there are over 20 in the local area). SALT has provided an independent 'voice' to its community by mobilising opinion & actions across a variety of issues.

Whilst the area and what has been achieved are impressive, they are not unique. There are many other developments trusts across the country that have achieved similar results.

Many such organisations are effectively represented and supported by Locality (formerly the Development Trusts Association – DTA). Locality has been successfully championing the concept of sustainable communities for many years. Much of what government currently advocates as the notion of Big Society exists in many of the areas where development trusts are located.

Whilst there is still a certain amount of scepticism surrounding the 'Big Society' (e.g. the association with public spending cuts, vagueness in outlining how it will be measured, becoming too politicised etc...) the general concept is still one that remains crucial to effectively engaging with communities. It remains important because the general principle of community driven, collective action at its best and most powerful gives people a meaningful and tangible stake in their communities.

## NEIL JOHNSTON, PADDINGTON DEVELOPMENT TRUST, WEST LONDON

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***The well-being of any society can be measured by the number of electors registered, numbers participating in civil democracy and self-governance. Collaborative governance would see local government reform where a political establishment empowers its fellow electoral citizens, enabling communities to generate their own civil transformation. There are opportunities to achieve this under the Localism Act but in some areas there could be a power struggle between un-empowered communities and Big Local Government.***

It took 10 years (1987 to 1997) to reinstate 'Society' after it was binned by Margaret Thatcher in 1987. The reclamation is extreme: it's back and this time it's big. But the meaning of Big Society is elusive in anything other than through its implied scale. Society is Big. In the context of Coalition policies it also provides an ideological antithesis to 'Big Government' and the conversion of public labour to private enterprise. David Cameron's big idea belongs with pre-Thatcher One Nation conservatism espoused by Baldwin, Macmillan, Heath, and Butler, and while it might contain an aspiration for social unity, the term itself does not directly assist in guiding the reformation of civil society or public markets. Indeed, it appears to be on the wane as real life sets in.

Notwithstanding, Big Society is defined by attributive social values. It is strongly associated with a political aspiration to empower 'small' societies through the transference of governance powers and fiscal responsibility to 'sub-governing' citizens. This, in turn, stimulates a civic infrastructure that improves both fairness and efficiencies in local public service, and grows opportunities through enterprise. One of Big Society's principal maxims is that its societal values are applied across the citizenry, particularly grassroots communities currently un-empowered in self-governance and fiscal resources and expertise.

So, how can we define the Big in Big Society? Assuming that society includes the total population of a given place, how is Big to be measured? Not, I think, by the number of volunteers active in any component of society, or indeed the general populace. I would suggest that the simplest – perhaps the only meaningful way – is through participation in the Electoral Roll.

A clear indication of the well-being of any society can be measured by the number of electors registered, numbers participating in civil democracy and crucially, self-governance. The common vote provides the hard data, as well as the hard drive for structural access to participative democracy, a core attribute of a functioning society. The failure of significant numbers of citizens to cast a vote is indicative of a disengagement from political society particularly at local levels where turn-out can be as low as 30% or lower. This can only be reversed through local government reform where a political establishment actively empowers its fellow electoral citizens. This might be termed collaborative governance and represents a key to civic reform, social cohesion, and civil empowerment.

Legislation now exists for the transfer of legal governance powers to civil society through the 2007 Local Government Act and most recently the 2011 Localism Act. Existing government policy supports the reforming aspiration; indeed political rhetoric is replete with reference to democratizing public services and empowering local people as a means to generating Big Society. But this reforming process won't happen by itself. This same legislation that allows for the transfer of powers makes the outcome itself subject to approval from local government members. And therein lies the rub: experience from around the country shows that principal opposition to grassroots governance comes from politicians within local government itself.

If local government were to empower communities, particularly those suffering extreme economic and democratic deficits, as encouraged in the legislation, these communities could be enabled to generate their own civil transformation. It is true therefore to say that local government reform will be determined by the transfer of public fiscal powers to smaller civic realms, subject to the same laws and regulations as operate within common, governing, and company law. Leaving the decision to distribute these powers wholly to reluctant local politicians renders reform on this scale, the very scale that must define Big Society, piecemeal.

Notwithstanding, there are over 9,000 town and parish councils operating across the country, some old, some new. Where they are working we are seeing a governing collaboration that, for example, allows for a precept to be collected by the local authority on behalf of a particular town, parish or community council which then uses that fiscal power in the interests of its electoral estate. Such community councils are accountable, in the context of a prevailing policy framework, to both local and central Government as well as to their local electorate. This provides local citizens with a greater stake in civic outcomes, closer participation in local government policy and in the design of local public services.

The current deficit in English electoral democracy is as bad as the fiscal deficit, most visibly within communities and neighbourhoods experiencing social, cultural and market failure, the broken bits of Big Society. Here one finds a confluence of political, social and economic failure stacked alongside a gross lack of active civil democracy and responsible community governance.

The Ward of Queens Park in the City of Westminster, London, is such a community. With a diverse population of about 12,000 people it is currently petitioning for parish powers granted through the 2007 Local Government Act and the 2011 Localism Act. The petitioning process in Queens Park will be evaluated in June 2012 when Westminster Council, after conducting a city-wide governance review, makes its decision. If successful, Queens Park will be the first community council in London. The local authority has the statutory power to deny the petition if it sees fit. Despite citizens' legal and transparent petition for democratic fiscal powers, the local authority can just say no. There is no appeal process.

The distribution of electoral power is not about one particular place seeking a DIY solution through the system; it is about many such places exercising choice, power and local knowledge in the context of local governance and democratisation of their 'small' civil society, an essential component in the structure of an inclusive Big Society.

A locally elected Community Council acts as a civic gateway to pluralist parliamentary democracy. It is defined in civil rather than political terms, furthering social and economic equity and the public interests of its electoral estate through social action, rather than particular political ideologies. It is founded on existing local government structure through town, parish or community, applying universal democratic principles. It is sustainable through precept powers, ownership of common assets and by raising money locally to improve the electoral estate.

Plainly Big Society is not only about the transformative power of local governance; it favours entrepreneurial individuals and market dynamics as well as the charitable and not-for-profit ethos encompassing social action, but it also uses a values-based language to define its social imperative. Fairness, social justice, opportunity, equality, participation, empowerment, self-governance, enablement, localism, all these words, and more, are used attributively, each contributing to universal well-being in the whole of society - Big Society - as defined by the electoral health and values of its diverse parts. Big Society is not a totally new idea; it could be the latest iteration in a history of social, civil and political reform through which democratic rights and powers have been increasingly distributed, concentrically, throughout civil society.

## MIKE HOUSTON, BETHNAL GREEN MISSION CHURCH, EAST LONDON

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***Under the cover of local empowerment, Big Society can allow central government to intervene locally by favouring one service, or service provider, over another already in existence. Although not new, this is no basis for truly sustainable local-led innovation. The voluntary/community sector needs to move away from its current dependency on government.***

The brand has been tainted – even toxic – but it doesn't mean the concept cannot be redeemed. If only we knew what it all meant! If we are serious in trying to understand the concept and work within/with it we must go beyond cynical attachment to political point scoring. This is hard because, as a voluntary organisation, there is a widespread feeling within our members and clients that the concept was a means to hand over responsibility of certain aspects of civil society to community groups without funding or support from government: in essence to gain credit for things which voluntary groups have been doing for decades. The concept seemed to have evolved from a vague sound-bite rather than any coherent strategy or political ideology.

This concern should be held in juxtaposition with another: that 'Big Society' becomes in practical terms, 'Big Government'. The government has used the Big Society mantra to empower community groups to set up new schools. This is a classic example of how Big Society is supposed to work. However, when these are set up in competition with local state schools (as in the case of Tower Hamlets) and are built from funds taken from the schools building programme, one cannot help think that the concept is a charade for a central government political agenda and a sleep-walk into societal change through the force of the market.

In practical terms, this has been the case for many years, as some voluntary groups have often existed on the basis of core funding from government and therefore taken its *raison d'être* from being essentially an extension of government programme. Rather than being strengthened in genuine partnership with government, third sector groups have often lost their autonomy. Locally-led innovation is only sustainable when and where the political wind is blowing (and money flowing!). Big Society needs to move away from this flawed model of 'partnership', that is, neither unsupported delegation of some local services nor dependent extension of government. Even the Big Society concept of volunteering seems to be neatly packaged and promoted as formal arrangements of people under organisational structures and institutions.

If the Big Society idea is to revisit the 'golden era of welfare state' as David Cameron has sometimes alluded to, then he has grossly misjudged the cultural changes that the country has gone since post-war era. One positive thing to arise from the concept is the Localism Bill. But genuine listening needs to take place in order to result in authentic community self-determination. Is this possible for any government?

## VAUGHAN JONES, PRAXIS, EAST LONDON, SERVING DISPLACED COMMUNITIES

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***Big Society is a government-led attempt to reshape civil society, diminishing - and at times even vilifying - some of the autonomous, free associations that make it up and re-defining it within the sphere of the market. Third sector organisations need to beware of attempts to replace properly funded public services with charity. There remains a fundamental question about how the various sectors of civil society can regain their position as the creator and defender of democracy.***

Big Society is a strange term which was designed to achieve two things. Firstly, it was intended to counter Margaret Thatcher's now infamous statement that there is 'no such thing as society' thereby detoxifying the Tory 'brand'. Secondly, it aimed to be a slogan to describe the overarching narrative of the Conservative Party's 2010 election campaign. It crystallised Cameron's philosophy of 'small government'. They argue that there is such a thing as society but it is not co-terminus with government. Undoubtedly, they were also informed by some of the intensive lobbying of the third sector which was seeking, with perhaps less than altruistic intention, to secure a substantial slice of the soon-to-be-auctioned public services.

There are, however, some matters of deep concern. The concept of the Big Society should be seen within what is widely acknowledged to be a growing democratic deficit. A genuinely functioning democracy is dependent upon the balance of power and responsibilities and the accountability structures of government, market and civil society. At a time when financial institutions appear to have greater power over the destiny of citizens than government, and government constantly has to take on board 'market reactions', we see the third sector increasingly tempted by and often cajoled toward the market place and away from our traditional locus operandi.

Big Society is not the same as civil society. Big Society is a top-down governmental attempt (despite the rhetoric) to control civil society by re-defining it within the sphere of the market. Civil society is best understood as the free association of people in a wide range of autonomous and inter-related bodies, including representation within legal processes, trial by jury, trade unions, faith communities, protest and special interest lobbies, and community organisations.

What we see in the current government's programme is a diminishing of the role of civil society and at times open vilification of these institutions. So by attempting to mould civil society within their agenda, the government is distorting the essential democratic balance. It is civil society's role to create government, out of its complexity and competing interests, rather than government to define and order civil society.

Civil society and market are also distinct. The economy is dependent upon effective trade and commerce, manufacture and finance which are in turn dependent upon government not only for regulation, but also for the national infrastructure and the provision of an educated and appropriately skilled workforce. They are also dependent upon citizens who purchase their goods and are willing to trade their labour for a fair wage. Government has a responsibility to broker the relationship between market and society and ensure space for the negotiations necessary to ensure this is happening. They do this not least by the imposition of just taxation and redistribution of those resources.

Of course, the voluntary sector as part of civil society must run its affairs in a well-ordered, business-like manner. There will be an overlap between its activities and service industries but it must also have a clear understanding, which few of our current leaders appear to have, of its distinctiveness in relation to the market economy.

The concept of the Big Society is both seductive and dangerous. Voluntary sector leaders, large NGOs, voluntary organisations have reason to welcome the government's promises of a shift away from public services to a fusion of charity and private sector. However, we must all recognise the underlying agenda and what it means for democracy itself. Government is starving the oxygen of civil society whilst at the same time elevating charity.

On one level, the government's analysis has merit. The voluntary sector has in recent years become an implementation tool for government programmes. Its independence has been compromised from time to time. Government should 'get out of the way' but in order to allow civil society to be diverse, multi-dimensional and not to restrict resources only to those in line with its own ideology, which will inevitably be blinkered.

Whilst a debate about Big Society might already have been abandoned even by its authors, there remains a fundamental question about how the various sectors of civil society can regain their position as the creators and defenders of democracy. Into the mix of this discourse will come notions of civil liberties, human rights and citizens' rights. It will need to reflect on the role of the voluntary sector leadership in its dealings with government on our behalf. Above all it needs to focus on civil society itself and how we can strengthen ourselves, through our diversity and breadth, to be agents of the re-creation of democracy, equality and social justice rather than be victims of the market and the passive instruments of government.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Graham Fisher** is the Chief Executive of Toynbee Hall. Toynbee Hall's aim is to be the place where people come for excellent local services and where they can share ideas and experience, gather information and knowledge that we use together to take action to change lives and eradicate poverty in Britain.

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**Martin Halton** was the research manager at *Social Research and Development*, the Seedley & Langworthy Trust's in-house research consultancy service. He has moved to a new job and Lorna Leaston, the general manger, was also involved in this publication. The Seedley and Langworthy Trust (SALT) is a community alliance which was set up in 1997. Its mission is to support and represent local people in the long term regeneration of the Seedley and Langworthy area in Salford and to develop community enterprise in partnership with key agencies to meet local needs and create a sustainable organisation.

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**Mike Houston** is the pastor at Bethnal Green Mission Church. BGMC is a small, welcoming, multiracial church based in the heart of a vibrant and bustling area of London's East End, Bethnal Green. It seeks to offer a place of welcome, openness and belonging in the different aspects of its work and church life. It is a Fair-trade church and seeks to work for justice locally and across the world.

Bethnal Green Mission Church  
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**Vaughan Jones** is the Chief Executive of Praxis. Praxis provides a wealth of advice and support services to migrants and refugees from all over the world, as well as a welcoming meeting place for displaced communities. Its mission is being with displaced communities, listening and acting through our common humanity to create and nurture reconciliation, human rights and social justice.

Praxis Community Projects  
Pott Street  
London E2 0EF

Tel: 020 7729 7985  
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Email: [admin@praxis.org.uk](mailto:admin@praxis.org.uk), [www.praxis.org.uk](http://www.praxis.org.uk)

## ORGANISATIONS THAT ATTENDED THE ROUNDTABLE

Organisation	Attendee	Role	Website
Tower Hamlets Food Bank	Denise Bentley	Chief Executive	<a href="http://www.towerhamletsfoodbank.org.uk">www.towerhamletsfoodbank.org.uk</a>
Gulbenkian Foundation	Andrew Barnett	Director	<a href="http://www.gulbenkian.org.uk">www.gulbenkian.org.uk</a>
City Bridge Trust	Jenny Field	Deputy Chief Grants Officer	<a href="http://www.citybridgetrust.org.uk">www.citybridgetrust.org.uk</a>
Toynbee Hall	Graham Fisher	Chief Executive	<a href="http://www.toynbeehall.org.uk">www.toynbeehall.org.uk</a>
Islington Play Association	Anita Grant	Director	<a href="http://www.islingtonplay.org.uk">www.islingtonplay.org.uk</a>
Seedley & Langworth Trust, Salford	Martin Halton	Research Manager	<a href="http://www.seedleytrust.co.uk">www.seedleytrust.co.uk</a>
Bethnal Green Mission Church	Pastor Mike Houston	Director	<a href="http://www.bethnalgreenmissionchurch.co.uk">www.bethnalgreenmissionchurch.co.uk</a>
Paddington Development Trust	Neil Johnston	Chief Executive	<a href="http://www.pdt.org.uk">www.pdt.org.uk</a>
Praxis Community Projects	Vaughan Jones	Chief Executive	<a href="http://www.praxis.org.uk">www.praxis.org.uk</a>
New Policy Institute	Peter Kenway	Director	<a href="http://www.npi.org.uk">www.npi.org.uk</a>
Kingsgate Community Centre	Donna Liburd	Centre Director	<a href="http://www.kingsgatecommunitycentre.org.uk">www.kingsgatecommunitycentre.org.uk</a>
London Borough of Enfield	Anna Loughlin	Sustainable Communities Team	<a href="http://www.enfield.gov.uk">www.enfield.gov.uk</a>
New Policy Institute	Steve Macarthur	Research Associate	<a href="http://www.npi.org.uk">www.npi.org.uk</a>
Warwick Business School	Ines Newman	Principal Research Fellow	<a href="http://www.wbs.ac.uk">www.wbs.ac.uk</a>
Shoreditch Trust	Jacqui Roberts	Chief Executive	<a href="http://www.shoreditchtrust.org.uk">www.shoreditchtrust.org.uk</a>
Civil Exchange	Caroline Slocock	Director	<a href="http://www.civilexchange.org.uk">www.civilexchange.org.uk</a>
Trust for London	Rachael Takens-Milne	Grants Manager	<a href="http://www.trustforlondon.org.uk">www.trustforlondon.org.uk</a>