

Briefing Paper 51

Below the radar in a Big Society? Reflections on community engagement, empowerment and social action in a changing policy context

Angus McCabe, Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham

Introduction

'The Big Society' has become a key element of the Coalition Government's policy platform, not only on the delivery of public services by the formal and funded voluntary sector but also in terms of communities, more informal third sector activities and individual citizens. Whilst the term itself is new, and accompanied by the 'new language' of social action, there are continuities between current policy objectives and those of the previous administration: the devolution of powers to the local level, the reconfiguration of services and promotion of community engagement, empowerment and active citizenship.

This briefing paper and accompanying working paper explores the debates about 'below the radar' (BTR) community groups and their assumed role in delivering 'big society'. It argues that the motivators for community action are, and have been, ill understood in various policy circles and that, despite changes in the terminologies of community development to social action as applied to neighbourhood governance and management there is again a certain continuity. The paper examines the implications of the 'new policy environment' for small community groups and asks if such activity, which has often been independent of, and operated outside the state, can be co-opted to deliver particular government policy objectives?

Below the Radar in policy context; continuity and change

The term 'below, or under, the radar' (BTR) has become a short-hand term often applied to describe small voluntary organisations, community groups and more informal or semi-formal activities in the third sector. It has been estimated that there are between 600,000 and 900,000 such groups in England and Wales and that, as such, they constitute numerically the largest part of the third sector. Interest in such activities (beyond the role of the formal voluntary sector in public service delivery) has grown in recent times. Under New Labour such groups were to be engaged in the delivery of a wide range of policy objectives – from community safety through to neighbourhood regeneration and social cohesion. [The Coalition's statements on Big Society](#) have given debates on the motivations, roles and capacities of community groups a new urgency.

Although 'the Coalition Government's vision of the Big Society is not entirely clear' (Rowson et al. 2010: 66) it has been viewed as a new policy direction with increased expectations on community groups. Oppenheim et al. (2010) argue that the concept of 'Big Society' taps into 'a powerful tradition of mutualism, co-operatives and the social economy – a tradition which straddles different ideological standpoints'. Further, there are also certain quite specific policy continuities between

Coalition statements and the previous administration's agendas towards communities, their roles and responsibilities and relationship with Government. For example:

- The transfer of public assets to community ownership or management, introduced in the Quirk Review (2007) remains a Coalition aspiration.
- Making budget decisions 'at the street level'¹ has similarities with participatory budget setting whilst the idea of returning power to local authorities communities can be related to New Labour's 'double devolution' agenda and communities in control.
- Building Britain's Future (HMG 2009), argued that every young person should give 'at least 50 hours of service to their community in their teenage years....this will become a customary part of the growing up process for every young person.' More recently David Cameron and the Government have highlighted two months National Citizen Service as '...a programme for sixteen year olds to give them a chance to develop the skills needed to be active and responsible citizens'.
- The proposed Big Society Bank bears more than a passing resemblance to New Labour's Social Investment Bank and the community development finance initiatives from earlier in the last decade.

Policy continuity can, however, be over-stated. There are also substantial discontinuities between New Labour's statements on community engagement and the 'Big Society'. Perhaps the most immediate have been the dismantling of one tier of devolved governance with the abolition of Government Offices for the Regions and the Regional Development Agencies as well as substantial reductions in budget for community sector network and infra-structure bodies regionally and nationally. But there are also other shifts – some ironic. A key aim of 'Big Society' is the end of 'imposing top-down diktats from Whitehall'.² Yet, whilst much of the previous Government's policy towards communities had an element of voluntarism (in asset transfer, participatory budget setting etc.) there is a language of 'aspirational

compulsion' in the Coalition's statements on Big Society 'Creating more responsible and active communities where people play a part on making society a better place'.³ There will, for example, National Citizen Service for 16 year olds (a concept of compulsory volunteering). There will be a new generation of 5,000 community organisers who will become self-funding. Public service workers will form 'John Lewis style' partnerships; community groups and social enterprises will run services and manage assets as the state can no longer afford to provide.

The Language of Big Society

The language surrounding communities and community activity that accompanies the concept of 'Big Society' has also changed. This may seem a minor point given current deficit reduction strategies and their likely impact – but semantics are important and underpin not only messages about policy direction but also the values and principles which underpin policy.

Some of this may be purely cosmetic or an attempt to create a language for 'Big Society' which makes it a new idea and disassociates it from any possible continuities with the previous New Labour regime. So 'pathfinders' have become 'test-beds', 'delivery' has become 'implementation', and so on. Other shifts in terminology are, however, less cosmetic.

Concepts of social justice have been replaced by use of the terms 'fair' or 'fairness' alongside the terms such as 'liberation' and 'freedom' - the co-option of the language of radical Catholicism and transformational community development in the African context.

Under New Labour, community development became a key instrument for delivering a range of social policy objectives. In its recent practice, it has been criticised for becoming co-opted by the state, 'vacuous, empty of political content' or analysis (Pearce et al. 2010: 265) and far removed from its radical Freirean tradition (Freire 1970).

Within the Big Society, the language of community development and engagement has shifted to one of social action which may be significant. Social action has both radical origins (Alinsky 1971) and traditions. In its purest form it is about building movements and taking action. It does so without accepting funding from the state, whether local or

national, as this involves compromise at the very least, or agendas being driven by Government rather than communities and citizens (Minkler 2005). In the US context citizen, or community, organising has been able to retain this independence through Foundation funding and money from faith organisations, in particular the Church. That financial basis is very different in the UK where this model is less embedded – though where it has been adopted it has become influential and maintained a tradition of direct action: for example London Citizens campaigns on affordable housing (Our Homes, Our London) and asylum seekers and refugees (Strangers into Citizens).

As, or if, citizen organising becomes the mainstream instrument to ‘mobilise people for a state project’ (Pearce et al. 2010: 271) with the training of 5,000 community organisers, it will be interesting to see whether this model of social action, like elements of community development practice, becomes co-opted by the state or whether citizen organising retains a radicalism which may inevitably bring it into conflict with Government.

The Impact of Big Society

At this stage it is too early to tell what the full impact of the Big Society will be on voluntary and community groups. It is therefore only possible at this stage to pick up ‘early signs’. Sector infrastructure bodies are particularly vulnerable. ‘Capacity building’ organisations, Empowerment Partnerships and other voluntary sector regional structures which related to Government Offices are on the verge of disappearing as are a range of ring fenced funding streams into which community based groups could bid – Working Neighbourhoods and Future Jobs Funds for example.

There may well be differential effects on those voluntary organisations which have become largely reliant on state funding and contracts, and small BTR, self financing, volunteer based, community groups. Both, however, are faced with increased expectations of their role and pressures on their services. Whilst the former may be vulnerable to reductions in statutory sector spending nationally and locally, community groups may also be effected by, for example, the closure of community centres and the loss of ‘in kind’ or below cost access to local authority premises and expertise.

Yet one early impact may have been the loss of solidarity or collective identity within, particularly, the formal and funded voluntary sector. The notion of a single, unified, third sector has always been fragile and contested (Alcock 2010), given decades of competitive tendering and resource competition and more recently of mergers and acquisitions. However, the sector continues to argue that it operates from a different value base, which is not purely financial, to the private and statutory sectors which makes it different and unique. Whether this remains true, or tenable, in the face of increased competition for resources, remains to be seen.

As one representative of a national community sector network organisation in a recent interview for the TSRC’s ‘below the radar’ research recently expressed: “A lot of voluntary organisations have seen the writing on the wall. They are now all desperately trying to make sure that writing is not on their particular wall.”

Despite budgetary concerns, so far, the response of the Sector has been broadly, if cautiously, welcoming. ‘Big Society’ is an opportunity for the expansion of the sector in the medium to longer term and where doubts have been expressed, particularly around the likely impact of deficit reduction strategies, this has been done so with caution (Chanan and Miller 2010).

Indeed, the most savage criticisms of ‘Big Society’ have not been from third sector organisations but from the media, both that on the political right and the broad left. The Economist (22nd July 2010) dismisses it as ‘a baggy concept’ which is ‘fanciful [in] its vision of a renaissance of voluntarism’. Beyond the media, there have been some criticisms that the Big Society is not ambitious enough and that the initiatives high-lighted in the four vanguard communities’ of Liverpool, Windsor and Maidenhead, Sutton and Eden Valley in Cumbria are small scale. For example, Coote (2010) writes that the scope of ‘Big Society’ needs to be both wider and deeper than these proposed actions suggest and needs to address ‘how we live and work, relate to each other, organize our economy and society, and safeguard our environment..... Only with a transition on this scale can the best elements of the ‘Big Society’ vision be realised and sustained over time.’

What is evident, however, from even a summary review of recent both academic and practitioner writing on 'The Big Society' is that much of this has focused on its impact on the formal voluntary sector and the delivery of public services rather than on informal or semi-formal community groups and activities. So where do, and have, 'below the radar' groups fit within the continuing agendas of engagement, empowerment and, now, social action?

Below the Radar in a Big Society: critical issues

In the transition from rhetoric to reality the Big Society faces a number of critical challenges. There is an implicit assumption that voluntary activity will increase – though the level of formal volunteering has remained virtually static for the last decade.

David Cameron has said that the Conservative Manifesto was “an invitation to join the government of Britain”.⁴ The statistics on public participation in democratic process question whether there may be enough willing to do so. It also begs the question of whether citizens, communities, have sufficient trust in traditional political systems to engage in those formal democratic processes or whether they are best served by taking action outwith Government through protest and direct action. Indeed in a recent speech to the Institute for Government (6 July 2010) Lord Wei acknowledged that “Government is not very good at mobilising mass civic action.”

This may be true if referring to Government's mobilisation of people to achieve a particular state agenda. Where Government (both national and local) has actually been extremely successful in galvanising community action is when it has angered people. In the last decade, such successes have included the establishment of the Countryside Alliance and the campaign against the banning of fox hunting, the anti-Iraq war demonstrations and anti-globalisation actions at the G8 and G20 Summit. If anger has been under-estimated as a motivator for social action, so has the fact that a major factor in being active in a community is social – to meet people, feel connected and fun

(Phillimore and McCabe 2010). This is not to minimise the value of community based social activity. It is something wider and deeper than the organisation of recreational activities. It is about the basic social needs of humans to interact. Clubs, societies, village fetes etc. all make significant contributions to social cohesion as well as to combating isolation and promoting health and mental wellbeing. These are all Government agendas (both now and in the recent past) but this is not why those groups exist. They are there to meet basic human needs, not deliver on policy agendas. This can be seen either as a weakness in community based activity – or as a celebration of the independence of civil society and its motivators from the state and raises the question – can such activities be co-opted into delivering the 'Big Society'?

Next Steps: the research agenda

Current debates on the Big Society have generated a number of important research questions. Will this agenda exacerbate current inequalities by favouring strong communities with the resources, skills and knowledge to engage at the cost of the voice of the disempowered? Who 'owns' Big Society? Is it a bottom up process with communities in control or a top down directive, linked in the minds of the public, to cuts in public services? In an environment where infra-structure support for the sector was vulnerable, how best could community engagement and action be developed? Indeed, Will citizens and communities 'scale up' to meet the challenge of delivering on a central Government agenda or remain 'below the radar'? Addressing these questions is the key challenge for the Below the Radar work stream in the coming year.

¹ Cabinet Office Press Release 5th August 2010.

² Eric Pickles, Communities Secretary: Cabinet Office Press Release 5th August 2010.

³ Frances Maude and Nick Hurd 12th November 2010: Open Letter to the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors. Cabinet Office.

⁴ Cited in The Economist 22nd July 2010.

This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsrc.ac.uk for more details and a copy of the full Working Paper 51

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Office for Civil Society (OCS) and the Barrow Cadbury UK Trust is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the joint ESRC, OCS Barrow Cadbury Third Sector Research Centre