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

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

'You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment, you can call it freedom, you can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society' (Prime Minister David Cameron: 19th July 2010).

'Bottom-up and community-led activities which so often bubble along under the radar are receiving new public recognition. This is in part because we are on the threshold of political change and deep economic restraint...' (Oppenheim et al., 2010: 2).

## Abstract

'The Big Society' has become a key element of the Coalition's Government 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 recent, and accompanied by the 'new language' of social action, there are continuities between the current Coalition policy objectives and those of the previous New Labour administration: the devolution of powers to the local level, the reconfiguration of services and promotion of community engagement, empowerment and active citizenship.

This 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 policy circles. Further, there is and has been little systematic analysis of the power relationship between the state (both locally and nationally) communities and neighbourhoods which can inform meaningful debate on devolution and localism. The paper examines the implications of the 'new' policy environment for small community groups and asks can such activity, which has often been independent of, and operated outside the state, be co-opted to deliver particular government policy objectives?

## Keywords

Big Society, empowerment, community engagement, social action, community groups, below the radar.

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## Introduction: defining 'below the radar' groups and activities

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. Interest in such activities (beyond the role of the formal voluntary sector in public service delivery) has grown in recent times and cuts across a wide range of current policy concerns: from the engagement of Black and Minority Ethnic community organisations in community cohesion agendas and combating extremism, through to supporting grass roots community economic development in excluded neighbourhoods as well as the involvement of community based organisations in modernising local governance, community safety and health planning and policy (McCabe et al., 2010). The debate on these groups has been given a greater urgency with the change in Government in May 2010 and the introduction of the concept of the 'Big Society' which aims to give below the radar groups a higher profile, and substantially greater role, in the delivery of Government policy agendas (DCLG, 2010a and 2010b; HM Government, 2010a and 2010b).

The Office of the Third Sector (now the Office for Civil Society) recognises that 'the phrase under the radar is ungainly' (OTS, 2008: 3) and that there is no precise definition of the term. For example MacGillivray et al. (2001) use the term BTR to refer to those groups or activities that are 'unregulated' and do not appear in databases held by the Charity Commission, Companies House, the Regulator of Community Interest Companies or Guidestar. Other commentators note that even very small community based organisations will register with the Charity Commission but are 'below the radar' because of very limited or uncertain incomes. For example, in a study of resilience in charities using an analysis of the Scottish Charity Register (McCrae and Nowak, 2010) found that 80% of organisations on the Register had incomes of less than £25,000 per annum and that the majority of these were 'micro-groups' with annual turnovers of less than £2,000.

There is, however, no consensus about the threshold of income that leaves activities under the financial radar. NCVO describes charities with incomes of less than £10,000 per annum as 'micro charities' (Kane et al., 2009). Alternatively CEFET (2007) use an annual income of £35,000 to define 'grass-roots or street level' organisations. Thompson (2008) identified two funding thresholds; organisations with funding less than £250,000, which are small, relative to the big childrens' charities; and 'smaller' under the radar organisations with income of less than £50,000 per year.

In terms of measuring, or quantifying, the Third/Civil Society Sector there are now almost 171,000 registered charities in the UK (Kane et al., 2009). Once we broaden the focus to the wider, 'below the radar' community sector it becomes far more difficult to make any claims about the exact size of the sector though it is these groups which, numerically, represent the mass of activity below the tip of the iceberg of registered charities and social enterprises. MacGillivray et al. (2001) argue there are more than 900,000 micro-organisations in the UK. The New Economics Foundation estimate is between 600,000 and 900,000 (cited in Kane et al., 2009) and NCVO itself estimates there are some 870,000 'civil society' organisations whilst noting that the quality of data on informal community organisations is poor nationally and regionally (Community Research Centre, 2010).

Both the work of Chapman et al. (2009) in mapping the voluntary sector in the North East of England and the Office of the Third Sector sponsored local surveys on unregistered third sector organisations (Ipsos MORI, 2010) demonstrate the difficulties and resource-intensive nature, of ‘micro-mapping’ community groups accurately even at a highly localised level. Further, profiles of community action do not, as of yet, include or quantify virtual/on-line actions associated with new social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 1999; Smith and McCabe, 2009).

If ‘below the radar’ community organisations and activities form the majority of the third sector – (excluding ‘one off’ voluntary activities and informal care and social support arrangements between individuals and families), it might be expected that these groups will be integral to the delivery of ‘Big Society’ agendas both in terms of delivering/managing public services and in offering alternative, volunteer based, services at the community level. Yet is this the case? To what extent are the current expectations that Big Society will encourage community engagement and participation in the delivery of state policy based on research evidence on small community based activities. For, as Toepler (2003: 236) notes: ‘perhaps one of the few remaining big mysteries in non-profit sector research is the question of what we are missing by excluding those organisations from empirical investigations that are not easily captured in standard data sources.’

Where then, do below the radar community groups sit with ‘The Big Society’ and can they deliver or will they remain, in the words of the Community Sector Coalition (undated) ‘Unseen, Unequal, Untapped’?

## ‘Big Society’ as policy: continuity and divergence

In a Cabinet Office press release (5<sup>th</sup> August 2010) on the ‘Big Society’ The Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, announced ‘Today we are turning Government upside down’ by returning decision making to the local, ‘nano’, level. At the same time, the Minister for the Cabinet Office argued ‘Big Society’ was to be a radical departure from the previous Government’s policies in that it was ‘a real cultural shift’ and an end to ‘big Government, just tweaking things at the centre of power’.

Although ‘the Coalition Government’s vision of the Big Society is not entirely clear’ (Rowson et al., 2010: 66), Oppenheim et al. (2010: 2) 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’. Certainly, elements of ‘The Big Society’ have a long history within right wing political thinking, harking back to the idea of a pre-Welfare State golden age of mutualism (Whelan, 1997) and the ‘search’ for a ‘viable private, non-political alternative to the welfare state’ (Green, 1996: V). There is also evidence of borrowing from Europe (Free Schools in Sweden) and America (Citizen Organising). However, there are also certain 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’<sup>1</sup> has similarities with participatory budget setting (CLG, 2008: 1) whilst the idea of returning power to local authorities communities can be related to New Labour’s ‘double devolution’ agenda and communities in control (CLG, 2008: 2). Indeed, the recent statements by the Communities Secretary and Minister for the Cabinet Office bear more than a passing resemblance to David Milliband’s statement following a speech to the National Council of Voluntary Organisations that: “This new politics goes beyond structures and committees to policies that empower the individual citizen to take greater control of their lives” (The Guardian, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2006).
- A continued, if perhaps accelerated, emphasis on social enterprise as a mechanism for delivering public services.
- Refreshing ‘The Compact’ (Home Office, 1998) between Government and the voluntary and community sector (Conservative Party, 2008).
- 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 citizen’.
- 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 (BIS, 2010).
- Transforming the civil service into a ‘civic service’ by making regular community service a key element in civil servant staff appraisals can be related back to The Learning Curve (NRU, 2002) and a commitment to developing community informed skills and knowledge for civil servants involved in neighbourhood regeneration.

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 has been the dismantling of one tier of devolved governance with the abolition of Government Offices for the Regions and the Regional Development Agencies. But there are also other shifts – some ironic. A key aim of ‘Big Society’ is the end of ‘imposing top-down diktats from Whitehall’.<sup>2</sup> 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’.<sup>3</sup> There will be, for example, National Citizen Service for 16 year olds (a concept of prescriptive if not 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 and will run services that the state can no longer afford to provide.

The most substantial policy discontinuity, however, is likely to be in funding. Under New Labour, and indeed the previous Conservative administrations, the voluntary sector grew – at least in part through contracting and an increase in Government funding (Clark et al.: 2010). Whilst some care has been taken to separate out ‘Big Society’ as a policy objective in its own right, it is inexorably linked to deficit reduction, and a target of around 25% savings in public spending across Departments, with the exceptions of health and international aid. This was made explicit in an open letter to the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors by Ministers Nick Hurd and Francis Maude:

‘We have pledged to be as open and transparent as possible about how we are making savings. We are facing some of the most challenging economic times and every area of Government is looking at reducing costs and streamlining their work. The Office for Civil Society is no exception and I am committed to ensuring we are more efficient and effective than ever before and that our resources are focused on where they are needed most’ (Cabinet Office 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010: Open Letter to the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors).

It is possible to over-emphasise divergence here as the New Labour administration both emphasised the need for voluntary organisations to diversify their funding base to be less dependent on Government and, in its 2010 Election Manifesto, was also committed to unspecified budget reductions.

## 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’, ‘targets and outcomes’ are ‘results and impact’. Other shifts in terminology are, however, less cosmetic.

Concepts of social justice have been replaced by the use of words such as ‘fair’ or ‘fairness’ alongside terms such as ‘liberation’ and ‘freedom’ - the co-option of the language of radical Catholicism and transformational community development in the African context (Hope and Timmel, 1984) . However imperfectly defined, or associated imperfectly with ‘third way’ politics and economics (Jordan, 2010) there is a substantial body of historical, economic, sociological, theological and social policy literature on concepts of social justice: a literature which relates directly to debates on equalities and social exclusion (Rawls, 1971; Atkinson, 1983; Craig et al., 2008). Concepts of fairness are much harder to define and therefore legislate for and may, actually, only be in the eye of the beholder rather than based on any rigorous social analysis.

As social justice makes way to fairness, so to the language surrounding communities has changed with the ‘Big Society’. This is not to suggest that there was a consistency in the language of New Labour. Participation, engagement and involvement were all terms applied to community (CLG, 2006) though often used inter-changeably to mean consultation. Indeed, as a contested concept (Hoggett,

1997) the term was at times replaced by the less contentious 'neighbourhood': as in Neighbourhood Renewal and Working Neighbourhoods.

The objectives of re-engaging citizens, involvement and participation were linked to a series of policy initiatives (from regeneration, through to community cohesion and 'double devolution') at the core of which lay concerns about declining social capital (Putnam, 2000; Field, 2003), community decline and public disengagement from formal political processes. Community development became one instrument for delivering these social policy objective (CLG, 2006) and, in its practice, has been criticised for becoming co-opted by the state (Ledwith, 2005), adopted as 'a means for sustaining the existing social order' (Cooper, 2008: 4) 'vacuous, empty of political content' or analysis (Pearce et al., 2010: 265) and far removed from its radical Freirean tradition (Freire, 1970).

Yet, as the Power Report (2006, 16) noted:

'Contrary to much of the public debate around political disengagement, the British public are not apathetic. There is now a great deal of research evidence to show that very large numbers of citizens are engaged in community and charity work outside of politics. There is also clear evidence that involvement in pressure politics – such as signing petitions, supporting consumer boycotts, joining campaign groups – has been growing significantly for many years. In addition, research shows that interest in 'political issues' is high. The area of decline is in formal politics.'

Other Power Inquiry papers (Smith, 2005) highlighted innovation in participatory and deliberative democracy 'beyond the state': direct action, new social movements (Della Porta, 1999), social action, citizen organising and other spaces for autonomous debate and action.

How far the Power Inquiry has influenced Coalition thinking on the 'Big Society' may be debatable – but the move from a language of community engagement to one of social action may be significant. Social action has 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 Citizen's 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.

In summary, there is both continuity and divergence in New Labour and Coalition policy and language regarding communities and community groups. Continuity in the rhetoric of transferring power and decision making down to the local level and discontinuity in how best this can be achieved, the scope of change– and the speed at which it can be achieved. How then will 'Big Society' impact on the third sector?



## The impact of 'Big Society'

During US President Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1971, Chairman Zhou Enlai was asked what he felt the impact of the 1789 French Revolution had been. His response was 'It is too early to tell'. It is certainly too early to tell what the impact of 'Big Society' will be on the voluntary and community sector.

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 the sector could bid – Working Neighbourhoods and Future Jobs Funds for example.

It is, as noted, too early to tell what the impact of 'Big Society' and proposed cuts (or deficit reductions) will be on the voluntary and community sector in the medium to longer term. How these will interact with the effects of the recession and reductions in corporate and public giving has yet to be fully seen or understood. 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 and whilst the former organisations may be vulnerable with 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.

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 and the changing nature of voluntaries into 'hybrid' organisations where private/community and statutory structures and functions become blurred (Billis, 2010) remains to be seen.

As one representative of a national voluntary 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 (22<sup>nd</sup> July 2010)

dismisses it as 'a baggy concept' which is 'fanciful [in] its vision of a renaissance of voluntarism'. Writing in *The Guardian* (6<sup>th</sup> August 2010) Polly Toynbee goes further, referring to Big Society as a 'big lie', commenting that 'the idea that a sector that is just 2.3% of the workforce can replace the welfare state is not so much fanciful as downright dishonest.' In the *Daily Telegraph* (2<sup>nd</sup> July 2010) Geoffrey Lean, laments the abolition of the Commission for Rural Communities as the loss of a voice to Government for the poorest in those communities and expresses a view that, ironically, 'a coalition of two parties that traditionally represented the countryside is betraying it.'

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' (or more accurately Local Authority areas) of Liverpool, Windsor and Maidenhead, Sutton and Eden Valley in Cumbria are small scale. Proposals suggested to date for enacting the Big Society agenda in these areas have included delivering broadband, changing local transport systems, community ownership of pubs and post offices and volunteering programmes to keep local museums open for longer hours. For example, Coote (2010) writes that the scope of 'Big Society' needs to be both wider and deeper than these proposed actions suggest:

'We need to shift from our current unsustainable path, to a system where everyone is able to survive and thrive on equal terms, without over-stretching the earth's resources. This means changing 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': community engagement, empowerment and social action: critical issues**

In June 2010 the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Third Sector Partnership Board Task and Finish Group on Deprived Neighbourhoods produced a discussion paper and recommendations on the role of the voluntary and community sector in deprived neighbourhoods. This makes explicit reference to 'below' or 'under' the radar community groups, with recommendations in the executive summary (p. 4):

'Developing the Big Society will be enhanced by:

4) Development work on 'below the radar organisations' which ensures greater visibility, connection and working with civil society organisations traditionally missed by local partnerships and programmes.

5) A re-appraisal of existing VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector) policy to ensure greater relevance and inclusion of largely unfunded groups including wider civil society organisations'.

This is a welcome recognition of the importance of small, community based, groups and activities which the paper goes on to identify as the largest part of the voluntary or third sector.

These papers go on to argue for the 'transformative role' of the voluntary and community sector in deprived neighbourhoods which 'is virtually without limit' (Executive Summary, p. 6). This again is welcome in the recognition of the role of community activity and action in promoting community health, wellbeing and acting as the social glue which binds communities (Phillimore and McCabe, 2010). However, what is the evidence base that community groups have the capacity, or indeed willingness, to engage with the above agendas?

In terms of levels of participation, there is a 'glass half empty, glass half full' debate, depending on different perspectives. For example, from one view point: 'Half the public do not actually want to be involved in decision-making in their local area. Even more – 55% – do not wish to be involved in decision-making in the country as a whole'. (Ministry of Justice/Hansard Society, 2009: 36) Indeed, the Conservative Party manifesto on 'Big Society Not Big Government' (2010), whilst aspiring to increase community action, notes that 'volunteering levels have remained static since 2001 and only 3% of the population participate in civic society'.

In contrast, the 2009 Ipsos MORI Survey of Third Sector Organisations (2009) found that voluntary and community organisations did want to engage and that the key determinant in positive relationships between the sector and local/central government was the extent to which they could influence both local and national policy decisions.

Similarly, there has been substantial debate on the perceived decline in civil society or social capital (Putnam, 2000). Yet, in its 2010 survey of volunteering, Communities and Local Government found that:

'In 2008-09, 26 per cent of people in England participated in formal volunteering at least once a month. This represents a fall since 2005 when 29 per cent of people participated, although there was no statistically significant change relative to 2007-08 (27%). Thirty-five per cent of people in England participated in informal volunteering at least once a month, a fall since 2005 when the figure was 37 per cent. Again, there was no change relative to 2007-08 (35%).

If these statistics are interpreted negatively (e.g. 79% of the population do not volunteer) then there is a view that civil society is, if not in crisis, certainly static or in gradual decline. Further, the profile of volunteers is within the 35-64 age range, highly qualified, white and in (managerial) employment with a decline in participation in the 18-24 years age group (Pathways Through Participation, 2010). However, the data only applies to 'formal volunteering' rather than the wealth of informal community activities which take place 'below the radar' and in black and minority ethnic communities (Phillimore and McCabe, 2010). Further, the above figures look particularly robust when compared to data on public participation in the democratic process:

'Eleven per cent of adults can be classified as 'political activists', according to the Audit definition, i.e. in the last two or three years they have done at least three political activities from a list of eight..... Over half the public (51%) report not having done any of these activities, an increase of three points since last year. Compared to 37% who had made charitable donations' (Ministry of Justice/Hansard Society, 2009).

This decline in voting, membership of political parties, political parties across Europe has been seen as disillusionment with traditional representative democracy (Henderson and Vercseg, 2010). Yet, as the Power Report (2006) points out, there are healthy democratic spaces which continue to exist and thrive beyond those of the formal political parties.

David Cameron has said that the Conservative Manifesto was “an invitation to join the government of Britain”<sup>4</sup> The statistics 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. Indeed much of the emphasis in the ‘trust debate’ at a grass roots, community, has been horizontal and related to cohesion debate and trust within and between communities. Less attention has been paid in formal policy, legislation and debates in terms of:

- parallel issues of trust ‘vertically’ – between citizen’s, their Government and elected members;
- the nature of democracy that communities can, or are willing to, engage with. Is it purely representative or deliberative democracy or does direct action and participatory democracy also have a legitimacy?

Further, as noted, this begs the question of whether citizens and communities want to join the Government, or at least the management of current state services, or whether they are best served by taking action outwith Government. Indeed in a recent speech to the Institute for Government (6 July 2010) Lord Wei acknowledged in a speech 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, anti-globalisation actions at the G8 and G20 Summits and most recently in the demonstrations against the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance and increases in student tuition fees. At the local level there are numerous examples of communities taking action on environmental issues and again, anger is a key motivator. Yet this is often an under-recognised aspect of community motivations to participate. Systems for community engagement over the last decade, have stressed the value of ‘participation’ or perhaps more accurately ‘consultation’, but underplayed both the creative and potentially destructive aspects of these strategies in terms of generating tensions between the state and communities and indeed between communities. Rather, emphasis has been placed on models of consensus building which could be alternatively interpreted as mechanisms for conflict avoidance (YHEP, 2009).

In terms of understanding community participation either in the double devolution of New Labour or the Coalition’s ‘Big Society, there are two further political issues.

**Firstly**, there is, and has been, a lack of systematic analysis of power relationships. This may seem a strange statement given that the themes of trust in politics and power run through Building Britain’s Future (2009) to statements on ‘Big Society’. David Cameron (Fixing Broken Politics 26<sup>th</sup> May 2010), for example has argued that citizens and communities:

‘See a world that is built to benefit powerful elites, and they feel a terrible but impotent anger. So we rage at our political system because we feel it is self-serving, not serving us. Pounded by forces outside their control, people feel increasingly powerless... deprived of opportunities to shape the world around them, and at the mercy of powerful elites that preside over them’.

Then, there are statements such as: ‘Only when people are given more power...can we achieve fairness and opportunity for all.’ (Cabinet Office, 2010) or: ‘We will promote decentralisation and democratic engagement and we will end the era of top down government by giving new powers to local councils, communities, neighbourhoods and individuals’ (HM Government, 2010a: 11).

The emphasis then is on devolving power to the neighbourhood or ‘nano-level’. Yet as David Cameron’s speech implies, power, real power, is rarely given away but has to be seized (Gramsci: 1929). Setting aside this ideological argument, the reality is that whilst communities can affect change, there are structural and global factors (from mass unemployment to the power of multi-national corporations and global warming) that cannot be easily solved at a nation state level, let alone a ‘nano’ community level.

**Secondly**, this concept of power at the neighbourhood or nano level raises questions about the role of the state itself. The implication behind ‘Big Society’ is that by devolving power to communities and creating a ‘small state’ this vertical trust between formal politics and citizens will somehow be restored. However, this avoids, or perhaps does not fully address, what the role of the state within, or in relationship to, civil society is, can or should be – and even less attention has been paid to the role of the private sector. Freedom in the World (2005) expressed concern that ‘small states’ are often actually failing states lacking the power to maintain law and order. Then there are the arguments presented by Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) that Governments have a central role in ensuring checks and balances within economic and social systems that reduce inequality and promote healthier, more prosperous yet equal societies. Further, writing in the Guardian (20<sup>th</sup> July 2010) Anne Coote, Head of Social Policy at the New Economics Foundation, warns:

‘We do need a state that is democratically controlled, and that enables everyone to play a part and acts as an effective mediator and protector of our shared interests. Democratic government is the only effective vehicle for ensuring that resources are fairly distributed, both across the population and between individuals and groups at local levels. Businesses or third-sector organisations can supplement these functions but cannot replace them, not least because they invariably serve sectoral or specialised interests, rather than those of the nation as a whole. If the state is pruned so drastically that it is neither big enough nor strong enough to carry them out, the effect will be a more troubled and diminished society, not a bigger one.’

Beyond a debate on the role of governments in civil society, there is, and has been, an underlying assumption (which also underpinned much of New Labour’s policies) in the ‘Big Society’ that all community engagement, all social action is good. Community groups can be ‘autonomous, empowered and dynamic’ but may also be (seen from a different perspective) ‘dissenting, resistant, dysfunctional and destructive’<sup>5</sup> or indeed oppressive, as can be seen by the co-option of community development by the Far Right.

The lack of acknowledgement of anger as a motivator for social action and the lack of a systemic analysis of power and the role of the state in civil society present real challenges to the concept of the ‘Big Society’. Yet there may be other, much more personal, barriers to making the aspirations of ‘Big Society’ into reality.

Whilst there is a body of literature on what motivates formal volunteering (Davis Smith, 1998; Locke, 2008) the drivers for community engagement are not well understood at a policy level, – nor is ‘enough known about the skills and support citizens need [to be active]. This is particularly true for hard to reach groups which are currently least likely to be engaged’ (Rogers and Robinson, 2004: 7).

Civic duty may be one factor, but in a recent i-Poll by I-Volunteer<sup>6</sup> 80% of respondents cited their reasons for volunteering as helping them to be happy (42%) and connected (38%). As an on-line poll, this may be an un-scientific, or unrepresentative, sample of volunteers. However 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 celebrate, rather than minimise, the value of community based social activity. It is something wider and deeper than ‘volunteering as serious leisure’ (Rochester et al., 2009: 13) and the organisation of sporting 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’?

Some have suggested not. Work pressures, or the pressure simply to survive, may be one factor:

‘In short, long hours and low wages undermine a key premise of the ‘Big Society’, which is that social and financial gains will come from replacing paid with unpaid labour’ (Coote, 2010: 4).

A second may be the tensions or divisions between work-life and volunteering at a grass roots level. People are looking for something qualitatively different in their community activity from the demands, pressures and duties of work - particularly in a recession and increasing uncertainty in the job market. They may not wish to be treated as an ‘employee’, nor carry the burden of responsibility implied, for example, by being a trustee, managing a community asset or running the local school.

## Conclusions

The Carnegie UK Trust Commission of Enquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland (2010: 3) commented:

‘Civil society activity meets fundamental human wants and needs, and provides an expression for hopes and aspirations. It reaches parts of our lives and souls that are beyond the state and business. It takes much of what we care about most in our private lives and gives it shape and structure. Helping us amplify care, compassion and hope.’

This may be the most substantial challenge to the implementation of the ‘Big Society’ as a policy concept. Whilst various commentators note that there is a lack of detail in ‘The Big Society’ which contrasts to New Labour approaches<sup>7</sup>, it is:

- on the one hand certainly, aspirational with the aim ‘to create the UK’s biggest mutual to which all citizens will be able to belong’;<sup>8</sup>
- on the other hand, Oppenheim et al. (2010, 4) warn ‘simply rolling back the state and expecting communities to leap into the driving seat will not be the answer’ whilst Chanan and Miller (2010)

note that ironically, in the forth-coming austerity, investment will be required in training and development work if 'Big Society' goals are to be achieved.

Others argue that 'voluntary action must be funded for its own sake and for the sake of communities, not just as a means of achieving Government targets' (NCVO, 2010: un-numbered page). Bacon et al., writing for the Young Foundation (2010) note that governments of whatever shade have not, and are not, best equipped to understand and support wellbeing in communities and, with a tendency towards 'discreet silos of service' (Sampson and Weaver, 2010: 1) are ill-suited to meeting community needs holistically or flexibly.

This last point may well be an argument for the devolution of power and service delivery to communities where there can be a more detailed knowledge of community needs and holistic responses to those needs (Phillimore and McCabe, 2010). Certainly there is a weight of expectation HM Government, 2010: 2) on what the 'Big Society' can deliver; not only 'more for less' but also:

- the restoration of faith in political systems;
- empowered and active citizens and communities;
- decision making based on real local knowledge and expertise;
- more flexible and cost efficient services;
- greater equality and 'fairness'.

Yet the lack of systematic analysis or evidence base to underpin the 'Big Society' presents a real challenge to this becoming a policy reality. Firstly, looking at the range and diversity of 'below the radar' activity, we already have a big society. Just not one that is, or wants necessarily to engage with government or 'scale up' to managing public services. What motivates grass roots, informal and semi-formal, community activity is little understood in policy circles and Picardian exhortations that communities should 'make it so' in building a political reality of Big Society may therefore be unlikely to succeed.

But there are perhaps two, even more substantive challenges. Firstly, will community trust in politics be restored if 'Big Society' becomes inexorably linked in the public mind with 'deficit reduction', the delivery of services 'on the cheap' and the rolling back of the welfare state to a residual role where consumers with resources have more access to quality choices whilst services for the poor become poor services? Secondly, can a policy which appears to lack a systemic analysis of power and the role of the state in relation to civil society, really deliver equality or fairness? The views of Henry Tam (2010: 121), reflecting on power, inequality and equality are timely in the current debates:

'Resistance to progressive reforms, at the local, national and global levels, will undoubtedly persist. Short-term concessions from the powerful should not be mistaken for lasting achievements. Where arbitrary power can still be exercised by the rich over the poor, bosses over workers, parents over their children, men over women, wardens over inmates, superpowers over small countries, one ethnic group over another, the weaker groups will remain at the mercy of the strong, and routinely suffer as a result of their malice or misjudgement. So long as such iniquities exist, the struggle for inclusive communities will continue'.

## Next steps

An early version of the current Working Paper was presented to the Third Sector Research Centre's 'Below the Radar' Reference Group to identify the challenges presented by 'Big Society' for communities, practitioners and policy makers as well as to inform next steps in research with small community groups and activities.<sup>9</sup>

Echoing Tam's commentary (above, 2010), participant's major concerns around the current direction of the Big Society were that this agenda could exacerbate current inequalities by favouring strong communities with the resources, skills and knowledge to engage at the cost of the voice of the disempowered. Further questions were raised on 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 both the voluntary and community sector is vulnerable, and earlier capacity building programmes had been criticised as an ineffectual investment (NAO, 2009), how best could community engagement and action be developed? Indeed, would citizens and communities 'scale up' to meet the challenge of delivering on a central Government agenda?

It is these areas of research that the TSRC 'Below the Radar' work-stream will be focusing on in the coming months. Firstly, one year on, what has been the impact of current policy and communities, community networks and infra-structure groups? Secondly, if 'traditional' approaches to building community capacity have been seen as mechanistic, highly formal and inappropriate for small community groups, how are skills, knowledge and resources gained and shared in below the radar groups. The aim is to critically inform policy and practice in this time of rapid change for communities and those that work with 'below the radar' community groups.

## End notes

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Office Press Release 5<sup>th</sup> August 2010

<sup>2</sup> Eric Pickles, Communities Secretary: Cabinet Office Press Release 5<sup>th</sup> August 2010

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

<sup>4</sup> Cited in The Economist 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2010

<sup>5</sup> Unpublished report: Connected Communities Workshop, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2010, University of Birmingham

<sup>6</sup> [www.i-volunteer.org.uk](http://www.i-volunteer.org.uk) accessed 6/8/10

<sup>7</sup> See for example 'Big Society Bite Sized at [www.urbanforum.org.uk/briefings/big-society-bite-sized](http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/briefings/big-society-bite-sized)

<sup>8</sup> [www.thebigsociety.co.uk/square-mile.html](http://www.thebigsociety.co.uk/square-mile.html)

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=8FqGwZTKHwM%3d&tabid=591> for a full report.



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## About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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## Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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